

In the Storms of Life, Do We Have a Shelter?: Basics of the Christian Faith

**Volume 2 — The Word of God, the Kingdom of Christ,
the Christian Life, Christian Ethics**

By Glover Shipp

J. C. Choate Publications
P O Box 72
Winona, MS 38967

Copyright 2015, Glover Shipp

Technical Information: Bible quotations are from the New International Version.

Order From
J.C. Choate Publications
P.O. Box 72
Winona, MS 38967
Phone: 662-283-1192
E-Mail: choate@WorldEvangelism.org
Website: WorldEvangelism.org

In the Storms of Life,
Do We Have a Shelter?:
Basics of the Christian Faith

**Volume 2 — The Word of God, the Kingdom of Christ,
the Christian Life, Christian Ethics**

By Glover Shipp

Acknowledgments

I am greatly indebted to Betty Choate for publishing this and other books I have written. Even after her beloved husband's death, she has carried on his legacy of Christian publications. She is very conscientious in editing and formatting the titles she publishes. I am also indebted to my long-time colleague Don Vinzant, for motivating me to put together this manuscript.

Dedication

This work is offered as a living sacrifice to our Lord, who made our life in Him possible. It is also offered to the younger generations, with the prayer that they may read it and come to understand better what they should believe and why.

Contents

Introduction	ix
Part 1 — The Word of God	11
1. Is the Bible Authentic or Merely a Collection of Stories?	13
2. What the Bible Says About Itself	17
Part 2 — Key Doctrines of the Faith	21
3. Redemption — Buying Us Back	23
4. Saints Alive — or Dead?	27
5. Grace, an Abused Gift	31
6. Is There Truly a Just Person?	35
7. Are We Predestined to Be Saved or Lost?	39
Part 3 — The Kingdom of Christ, His Church	43
8. Does Christ Already Have a Kingdom?	45
9. Word Pictures About the Kingdom	51
10. Does Christ Have a Body?	55
11. The Nature of the Church	59
12. The Structure of the Church	63
13. How to Be Born into Christ's Family	67
14. The Real Purposes of the Church	73
15. The Mission of the Church	77
16. Worship in the Church	83
17. The Church, a Nourishing Family	89
18. The Church, a Farming Community	93
19. The Church, a Gifted Priesthood	97
Part 4 — The Christian Life — Growing Toward Maturity	103
20. The Christian Life — A Work in Progress	105
21. On Being a Positive Influence	109

22.	It's All About Attitude	113
23.	If You Do It for Display ...	117
24.	Don't Let the Dow Get You Down	121
25.	Judging, Knocking, Entering and Fruit Picking	125
26.	Telling the Good Guys from the Bad	129
27.	Words Can Cut or Cure	133
28.	We Carry Around Too Much Baggage	137
29.	The Christian — Citizen of Two Countries	141
30.	Born to a New Life	147
31.	By Nature a Servant	151
32.	Integral Member of a Family	155
33.	Faithful Unto Death	159
34.	Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good Christians?	163
	Part 5 — Ethics, Anyone?	167
35.	When Christ and Culture Collide	169
36.	Walking the Walk	175
37.	No! Ethics in Government and Business	183
38.	In the Water, But Not of the Water	191
39.	Charting a Course Through the Ethical Swamp	197
40.	How Do We Respond to Moral Issues?	203
41.	Wrap-Up and Applications	207
	Appendices	213
	Resources	221

Introduction

“I long to dwell in your tent forever and take refuge in the shelter of your wings” (Psalm 61:4).

A former volume I have written (sounds familiar, doesn't it?) of what the Lord God tells us about Himself, His Son Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Angels, Satan and Demons.

Now, in this volume, we pick up with the inspiration and authenticity of the Bible, some key doctrines in the Word, The Kingdom or Church of Christ, the Christian Life, and finally, Christian Ethics. All of these topics are vitally important to our knowing God and serving in Christ's Kingdom.

In a world where doctrinal issues have been downplayed and considered irrelevant, we need to remind ourselves that doctrine is important. Paul told young Timothy, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). Again, he warned Timothy, “Preach the Word, be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:2-3).

This is quite clear, isn't it? I attempt in both volumes to present the true doctrine of Christ, to the best of my knowledge. I pray that you will verify all of it carefully and prayerfully. If it is true to Scripture, then take it into your own life and share it with others.

I close this introduction with the words of Fanny J. Crosby:

Safe in the arms of Jesus,
Safe on His gentle breast,
There by His love o'ershaded, sweetly my soul shall rest.

And from another old hymn, which echoes the thrust of both volumes:

The Lord's our Rock, in Him we hide,
A shelter in the time of storm;
Secure whatever ill betide,
A shelter in the time of storm.
O Jesus is our Rock in a weary land,
A weary land, a weary land;
O Jesus is our Rock in a weary land,
A shelter in the time of storm.
— Vernon J. Charlesworth

Glover Shipp,
Edmond, Oklahoma, 2009

Part 1

The Word of God: Inspired, Authentic, a True Guide for all Ages

Chapter 1

Is the Bible Authentic or Merely a Collection of Stories?

(Psalm 129:7-11, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21)

Introduction

The Bible is the result of centuries of accumulated writings by prophets or scribes inspired by God, as indicated in 2 Peter 1:20-21:

“Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

The earliest reference in the Bible to recording God’s words is found in Exodus 17:14, chronologically the second book of the Bible, at which time the Lord instructed Moses to write down His commandments and instructions on a scroll. In Exodus 20 the Lord wrote the Ten Commandments on tables of stone. In Exodus 24:4 we find that Moses copied everything the Lord had said to him. This occurred soon after 1300 B.C. He was followed by as many as 39 other writers, the last being the Apostle John, who wrote his vision in the book of Revelation shortly before 100 A.D. The Bible’s actual historical setting was from before the dawn of time until near the end of the first century A.D. (Genesis 1:1, Revelation 1:1-3, 9).

Those writings that became a part of the Bible were considered inspired, having been written, in the case of the Old Testament, primarily by recognized godly prophets. New Testament writers were all apostles of Jesus or close associates of the apostles. Although the entire Bible is considered inspired of God, this does not mean that the writers were mere robots or stenographers. This is clearly pointed out in the following quote:

“The fact that God speaks directly and uniquely through the Bible does not, however, reduce the biblical writers to typewriters. Each book gives clear

evidence of its human history. ... Luke painstakingly collected material for his two volumes [Luke and Acts] and did all he could to make them accurate records. The Old Testament writers also exercised powers of discrimination, omitting what they regarded as irrelevant to their purpose, but using what was needed. Paul wrote his letters with specific situations in mind. There are as immense stylistic differences between him and John as between, say, Isaiah and Hosea (**Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible**, edited by David and Pat Alexander, 1973:350).

Although there are many different writing styles in the Bible, it was all recorded under the guidance and inspiration of God. In addition, there are various kinds of literary genre in the text. These are Narrative, History, Monologue, Dialogue, Poetry, Proverbs, Prayers, Hymns, Sermons, Prophecy and Apocalyptic in the Old Testament; and Biography, Sermons, Parables, History, Letters and Prophecy in the New Testament. The Bible's Psalms are rendered in noble, moving style. Its wisdom literature is unsurpassed. Many sections of the prophetic books are in the classical poetic style of the ancient Hebrews, following precise rules of structure.

The original language of most of the Old Testament was Hebrew, the language of the Israelites before their captivity in Assyria and Babylonia. Some segments of late Old Testament books, such as Ezra and Daniel, are in part Aramaic, the language of the New Babylonian Empire. The New Testament was written primarily in Koinê Greek, the common trade tongue of the Roman Empire. There are a few expressions in the Gospels in Aramaic and it is possible that some New Testament writings, such as Matthew, may have been written initially in Aramaic and translated into Greek.

Early manuscripts

The oldest known fragment of the Hebrew text, the Aaronic Blessing, dates from the 10th Century B.C. The Nash Papyrus dates from the end of the second century B.C. or beginning of the first century B.C. The oldest known more complete manuscripts of the Old Testament are from the period before Christ and were found in 1947 in caves near the Dead Sea. The oldest manuscripts of the New Testament are fragments earlier thought to be from the second and third centuries, but more careful analysis recently showed that fragments from Matthew date back to before 70 AD (during the lifetime of the apostles). The oldest complete N.T. manuscript is the Codex Sinaiticus from the fourth century. It is followed by the Vaticanus and Alexandrian manuscripts.

Around 250 B.C. the Old Testament was translated into Greek. The New Testament was translated early on into Syriac, Coptic and Latin. The Old Testament came into written form over a long period of time. The first five books — Genesis through Deuteronomy — reached the form they now have in about 330 B.C. By 90 A.D. the Old Testament text was arranged in the order found even today in the Hebrew Bible — Law, Prophets and Writings. This is a monumental work written over a period of a thousand years by a number of writers.

The New Testament Greek canon (compilation) was finalized early in the fourth century. In 367 A.D. Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, proclaimed the New Testament to be fixed and unalterable. It has so remained to the present time. Beginning in 182 the Christian scholar Jerome began translating the Bible into Latin, following translations into Aramaic, Coptic, Syriac and Ethiopian.

The Bible has been given the most intensive scrutiny by scholars well versed in the original languages and in textual criticism. No text in all of history has been analyzed as diligently as the Bible.

Transmission and translation difficulties

After all this time, can we be certain that the Bible in its different versions in English is still authentic? No translation can adequately reproduce all of the nuances of the original, because there is no way to express well some sayings in another language. For example, we use the expression “to take for granted.” But we discovered that it could not be translated into Portuguese, because in Brazil’s fatalistic culture, nothing can be taken for granted. Everything is fate, and they believe that we have no way of predicting or controlling it.

This is one difficulty faced in translating. Another is religious bias. When the translators of the King James Version came to the word baptizo in Greek, meaning to “dip” or to “plunge,” they faced a dilemma. Official church doctrine was to sprinkle babies. If they translated the word as immerse, dip or plunge, that would cause them trouble; so they transliterated the word, making it “baptize.” This was not a translation at all. Worse still, almost every version since, in English, as well as in Spanish, Portuguese and other languages, render the word, baptize, as bautismo (Spanish), batismo, (Portuguese), baptême (French) and boptemeyah (Russian). Alexander Campbell did a version of the Bible in which he correctly used “immerse,” but the religious world in general rejected it.

In a few cases “prophets” produce a new “translation” that they claim is more correct (or even perfect) than existing versions. The Jehovah’s Witnesses New World Translation is a good example. Another is Thomas Jefferson’s infamous version, in which he took scissors to all passages that mention miracles or healings. And then there are cases of honest mistakes in translation. Translators of the original King James Version had the word, “Easter” in Acts 12:4, a concept not known in Bible times, but well-known in England in 1611.

So where is our true shelter?

At best, it is difficult to reproduce in another language the exact meaning and nuances of a particular word or phrase. No one version in English is perfect. That is why we should compare versions. One of the most accurate versions in English was the American Standard, but it didn’t read well, being too literally bound to the original languages. The best source is the original manuscripts, which are not available to us. The next best source is ancient manuscripts in Hebrew and Greek, and then modern copies of the Hebrew and Greek texts.

Having said all of this, can we trust our Bibles today as being the Word of God? God has preserved the thought and intent of His Word for us in a thousand tongues. He has not left us without guidance. It is up to us to study His Word and to apply it to our lives.

Chapter 2

What the Bible Says About Itself

(Psalm 129:7-11, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:20-21)

Introduction

The Bible has much to say about its authenticity and value for us. It has much to say about its authority. For thousands of years this Holy Book has been held in reverence. It is still the world's bestseller. It is still the most examined, taught and discussed text in all of history. The sad thing about this book is that some read it through their own distorting glasses. They read it with an agenda. They read it just as a proof text for their doctrinal position. They read it to refute its message.

Let us see now what the Word says about its value for us:

Moses recorded God's law.

- “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write this on a scroll as something to be remembered ... ’” (Exodus 17:14).
- “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel’” (Exodus 34:27).

God's Word is perfect.

- “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes” (Psalm 19:7,8).
- “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105). (In fact, the entire 119th Psalm describes in many ways the great truth and value of God's Word.)

Jesus spoke the Word of God.

- “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Matthew 24:35).
- “There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say” (John 12:48-50).

Paul spoke what he had received from Christ.

- “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11-12).
- “... when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the Word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

Paul affirmed that all Scripture (both Hebrew and the growing body of Christian writings at that time) is true and vital.

- “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Peter taught that the Word of God is imperishable.

- “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:22-23).

The Spirit warns against tampering with the Word of God.

- “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share

in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Revelation 22:18-19).

God’s Word— complete spiritual food

Much is said these days about dieting and balanced nutrition (and is this ever needed in our overweight society!). Jesus talked about this, also, but meant spiritual food, rather than physical. In John, chapter 4, He was at a well near the city of Sychar, when He entered into a discussion with a Samaritan woman. His disciples had gone to the town to purchase food. When they returned, they were surprised to find the Master talking with a woman, and a many-times-divorced Samaritan woman, at that. They urged Him to eat, but He said that He was already eating — spiritual food. He was lunching, so to speak, with this woman, who was considered beneath the dignity and ritual cleanliness of the Jews.

Jesus knew that food was necessary, but something else was even more necessary, breaking the bread of life with the lost woman. He had His spiritual priorities straight. If He considered the Word of His Father to be of supreme importance, even more so than physical food, how should we consider the Word?

From the above passages we can see that the Word furnishes us with complete balanced spiritual food. However, we are not forced to eat it. Isaiah had practical advice for us about this food:

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare” (Isaiah 55:1-2).

That advice is still as sound as ever. We chase frantically here and there. We fret over the economy and a host of other issues, when we could be eating the Lord’s bread and satisfying our spiritual hunger.

So where is our true shelter?

Everything we need by way of instruction and guidance is found in the Scriptures. We can rest assured that God has preserved it sufficiently for us, even in our own language. Our problem is not the *lack* of a road map to follow. It is not following it. Mark Twain once said, “My difficulty is not knowing all of the Bible; rather, it is in keeping what I do know of it.” Precisely.

We believe in the inspiration and practicability of the Bible. We believe that it is just as valid for us today as when first penned. And we have shown in these two chapters that we have good reason to believe in the authenticity of God's Word.

If we are not reading the Bible through each year, we need to start doing so.

But more than this, we need to study it and apply it. Only then will it come alive for us.

Part 2

Key Doctrines of the Faith

Chapter 3

Redemption — Buying Us Back

(Romans 3:24, Galatians 3:13, Colossians 1:14, Titus 2:14)

Introduction

To redeem something means to free it, buy it back or repay. When I was about 11, I sometimes went with my dad to distant preaching appointments in western Oregon. One rainy Sunday night, we were returning home on narrow U.S. 99 when the car ran out of gas. Dad relied on those preaching points to at least cover his expenses, but this time the tiny church gave him nothing, so we were stuck. He walked for miles in the rain to a gas station and left his pocket watch as a deposit in exchange for a gallon of fuel. On the next trip through, he redeemed his watch.

This is the nature of redemption, a major theme in the Bible. The Hebrew words are *gaal* (to redeem), *guelah* (redemption), *padah* (to free), *paraq* (to deliver) and *qanah* (to acquire). In Greek we have *agorazô* or *exagorazô* (to acquire or redeem at the agora, which was the forum or market and business place), *lutroô* (to loose by a price) and *apolutrôsis* (a loosing away).

Key passages that refer to redeem, to be redeemed, redemption or redeemer

- Genesis 48:16. An angel had delivered Jacob from all harm.
- Exodus 6:6, 15:13. The Lord delivered Israel from slavery.
- Exodus 13:13. The firstborn were to be redeemed.
- Leviticus 25:25. If an Israelite became poor and sold his property, his nearest relative was to redeem it. The matter of redeeming family property is played out interestingly in Ruth 4:1-12, where Boaz redeems Naomi's family property and marries Ruth the Moabitess, who becomes the great-grandmother of David and an ancestress of Jesus.

- Psalm 69:18. The psalmist asks God to come near and redeem him from his enemies.
- Psalm 77:15. With a strong arm the Lord had redeemed Israel.
- Psalm 103:4. The Lord redeemed the psalmist from the pit.
- Isaiah 44:22, Zechariah 10:8. The Lord calls on His people to return to Him, for He had redeemed them.
- Isaiah 50:2. The Lord asks, “Was my arm too short to ransom you? Do I lack the strength to rescue you?”
- Isaiah 63:9. In God’s love and mercy, He redeemed His people; He lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.
- Hosea 13:14. God will redeem His faithful from death.
- Luke 24:21. Disciples on the road to Emmaus explained that they had hoped Jesus would redeem Israel (more in a political sense than spiritual).
- Romans 8:23. Christians wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.
- Galatians 3:13. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law (referring to the law of Moses).
- Ephesians 1:7. In Christ we have redemption through His blood.
- Titus 2:14. Jesus gave Himself for us, to redeem us from all wickedness and purify us as His very own, eager to do good.
- Hebrews 9:11-14. Jesus entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.
- 1 Peter 1:17-19. We were redeemed, not with silver or gold, but with the blood of Jesus.

So where is our true shelter?

When we sin, we sell ourselves to Satan’s pawnshop. We cannot be redeemed from there by money or our own effort, but only by the blood of Jesus. He is our only Redeemer. If we do not submit to Him in faith, repentance, confession and baptism, we cannot be redeemed. He offers us redemption, but never forces it upon us.

Do we see, then, how crucial Christ is to our salvation? He is our only shelter. When some religions deny Him and His redemption, they lose all

hope of Heaven. When the multitudes of people in the world have never heard of Jesus and His redemptive power, they are lost. No wonder so many are restless and angry, and it is partially our fault. We have never shared our faith and hope with them.

Let us live as God's redeemed and share our redemption with as many others as possible.

Chapter 4

Saints Alive ... or Dead?

(Romans 1:7, 8:27; Colossians 1:12;
Hebrews 13:12; 1 Peter 3:15)

Introduction

The word “saint” is used in several ways, most of them not biblical. We may call a genuinely caring person a real saint. Or in the Catholic definition, certain very holy, dedicated people are “beautified” after death and given the title of saint. Various steps are necessary to achieve sainthood in that system. One is supposedly to have performed at least two miracles while living and two after death. Another is careful research of that person’s life. Yet another is the payment of a very hefty fee by the nominee’s sponsors. The individual in question was supposed to have had an excess of grace. By invoking that person in prayer, the supplicant can draw on this surplus grace. Pope John Paul II is now being recommended for sainthood. A nun came forward recently to claim that she had prayed to John Paul II after his death and was healed of a disease. So that leaves just one more post-death “miracle” to qualify him for sainthood.

The above uses of the word “saint” do not fit the Bible definition. In the Hebrew, the words are chasid (kind or pious) and qadosh (set apart, separate, holy). In Greek, the word is hagios or hagia (set apart, separate, holy). So we have the famous church building in Constantinople, Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom). Sanctify or sanctification in Hebrew is qadesh (to separate or set apart). In Greek it is hagiaziô (to set apart).

Key passages on the use of the word saint

- 2 Chronicles 6:41. Let the Lord’s saints rejoice in goodness.
- Psalm 30:4. Sing unto the Lord, O you saints of His.
- Psalm 37:28. The Lord does not forsake His saints.
- Psalm 89:7. God is to be feared in the congregation of His saints.
- Psalm 97:10. God preserves the souls of His saints.

- Hosea 11:12. God rules and is faithful with the saints.
- Matthew 27:52. At Jesus' resurrection, many saints were raised.
- Acts 9:22. Peter visited many of the saints in Lydda.
- Romans 1:7. Paul wrote to those in Rome called to be saints.
- Romans 8:27. Christ makes intercession for the saints.
- 1 Corinthians 6:2. The saints will judge the world.
- 2 Corinthians 8:4. Christians in Corinth were to have fellowship in ministering to the saints.
- Ephesians 1:15. The Ephesian church loved the saints.
- Colossians 1:12. We are partakers in the inheritance of the saints.
- 2 Thessalonians 1:10. The Lord will return to be glorified in His saints.
- Jude 3. The Word was once delivered to the saints.
- Revelation 5:8. The true incense lifted to God is the prayers of the saints.
- Revelation 19:8. Fine linen is the righteousness of the saints.

Use of the words sanctify and sanctified in the Bible

- Genesis 2:3. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it.
- Exodus 13:2. All of the firstborn of Israel were to be set apart or sanctified.
- Exodus 19:10-14. The people of Israel were to be sanctified in preparation for God's giving of the law.
- Leviticus 8:10. Aaron sanctified the tabernacle.
- Deuteronomy 32:51. On one sad occasion Moses and Aaron had not sanctified or held up the Lord as holy.
- 2 Chronicles 29:5. Hezekiah prayed that the temple be re-sanctified or consecrated.
- Job 1:5. Job sanctified his children.
- Jeremiah 1:5. Jeremiah was set apart for God's service from even before his conception.

- Ezekiel 36:23. God sanctified His great name.
- Joel 2:10. The people were to be gathered together and sanctified.
- John 17:17. Jesus prayed that the Father would sanctify the disciples.
- Ephesians 5:25-26. Christ gave Himself for the church, to make her holy by the washing of water through the Word.
- Hebrews 13:12. Jesus sanctified His people by His blood.
- 1 Peter 3:15. We are to sanctify the Lord in our hearts.

So where is our true shelter?

In our present society, even in the church, we have lost much of our sense of holiness and sanctification. We feel little awe as we approach the Lord in individual or corporate worship. Once, our family visited famous Iguazu Falls, on the border between Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay. Actually, it is a series of 127 falls, and in the rainy season tons of water cascades every minute over the falls. I was standing on a catwalk that extended into the most impressive of the falls, the Devil's Throat, drenched by foam and almost overwhelmed by its grandeur and power. An elderly Brazilian man turned to me and asked, "How can anyone not believe in God, when He has left such a calling card as this?"

Chapter 5

Grace, an Abused Gift

(Luke 2:40; Acts 4:33, 13:43, 15:10-11;
Romans 3:24; Galatians 5:4)

Introduction

A preacher in my younger days once told a lectureship audience, “There are only three things we need — Grace, Gravy and Gratitude.” I will never forget that statement, because it boiled down the Christian life to some very basic elements. These are: God’s divine favor, His providing our daily food, and gratitude for all that He does for us.

Grace is an aspect of God’s nature and care that is often abused. Grace is a big word these days, and well it should be. In recent decades in the church, it has not been mentioned much. In the denominational world, it has been over-emphasized to the point that even baptism is downgraded. Now some in the church are elevating grace and downplaying baptism.

We know from Scripture that we cannot save ourselves by ourselves. It is only by the grace of God through Christ that we can be saved. Grace must be accompanied by obedience.

I was surprised to find how many times the word grace appears in the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament. In Hebrew, the word is *chen*, meaning favor. In Greek it is *charis*, meaning favor or graciousness. A frequent salutation in the New Testament is *charis et irene*, meaning grace and peace.

Sample texts about grace

- Genesis 6:8. Noah found grace in the Lord’s eyes.
- Genesis 39:4. Joseph found favor in Potiphar’s eyes.
- Exodus 33:13. If Moses had found grace in God’s eyes, he wanted to learn the Lord’s ways, in order to know Him.
- Ruth 2:9-10. “Why have I found favor in your sight?”

- Esther 2:17. Esther obtained grace in the sight of the king.
- Proverbs 3:34. God gives grace to the lowly.
- Zechariah 12:10. God's people give a spirit of grace and supplication.
- Luke 2:40. The grace of the Lord was upon the boy Jesus.
- John 1:14,17. Jesus dwelt among us, full of grace. Grace and truth came by Him.
- Acts 4:33. Much grace was upon the Christians.
- Acts 13:43. Paul and Barnabas urged new Christians in Antioch to continue in the grace of God.
- Acts 15:10-11. Through grace we are saved.
- Acts 20:24. Paul testified to the Gospel of God's grace.
- Romans 1:5-7. Through Christ, Paul received grace and apostleship.
- Romans 3:24. We are justified freely by grace.
- Romans 4:16. God's promise comes by faith, that it may be by grace to all who are of Abraham's faith.
- Romans 5:1-2. We are justified through faith, gaining access to God through faith unto grace.
- Romans 5:20-21. Grace reigns through righteousness.
- Romans 6:1. Shall we go on sinning, that grace may abound?
- Romans 6:14. We are not under the law, but under grace.
- Romans 11:5-6. A remnant chosen by grace, not works.
- Romans 15:10. God's grace in Paul's life not without effect.
- Romans 16:23. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.
- 1 Corinthians 15:10. By the grace of God, Paul is what he is, a converted man and murderer. John Newton, a former slave trader, upon becoming a believer, wrote the beloved hymn, "Amazing Grace."
- 2 Corinthians 4:15. Grace reaching more and more people.

- 2 Corinthians 6:1. Grace can be received in vain.
- 2 Corinthians 12:9. God's grace sufficient for ailing Paul.
- Galatians 1:6, 5:4; Hebrews 12:15. It is possible to turn away from and to fall from grace. Many today deny this, believing "once saved, always saved."
- Ephesians 2:5. We have been saved through grace.
- Ephesians 3:6. Paul, least of all the saints, still received this grace.
- Colossians 3:16. Singing with grace in our hearts.
- 2 Timothy 2:1. Be strong in the grace.
- Titus 3:7. We are justified by this grace.
- Hebrews 4:16. Because of Christ, we can come boldly before the throne of grace.
- Hebrews 13:9. Our hearts established with grace.
- James 4:6. God opposes the proud, gives grace to the humble.
- 1 Peter 3:7. We are heirs together of the grace of life.
- 1 Peter 4:10. We must be good stewards of the grace of God.
- 2 Peter 3:18. We must grow in grace.

So where is our true shelter?

Grace, or divine favor, is a major theme in the Bible. Therefore, it must be studied, reflected upon, utilized and respected.

Martin Luther took hold of grace and made it, along with faith, the cornerstone of his doctrine. John Calvin went even further, teaching that, if we are predestined to salvation, we can never fall from grace. Both were partially right and partially wrong. We who have neglected grace, are also partially right and partially wrong. We need to arrive at true biblical balance on this matter.

We may be too much like the widow who approached her insurance company years after her husband's death to ask permission to quit paying on his policy, because she couldn't afford to keep up the payments. The amazed agent explained to her, "This policy is worth several hundred thousand dollars. You have been sacrificing to pay for something that is already yours." We often work hard at serving the Lord and relying little

on His grace. We must apply it and grow in it, since we can't survive spiritually without it.

Dr. Scott Cormode, an authority on church leadership, observes:

"... when I've been wronged or when I am dealing with someone else's sin (especially a sin that does not tempt me), I want judgment. When I'm feeling 'righteous indignation' welling up, I don't want to hear about grace. I want them to get what they deserve.

"... when I've become the one who thinks he can cast the first stone, I force myself to back off even if I am right ... because I realize I'm asking God just to be fair — to give them what they deserve. And then He reminds me: I don't want fair, I want grace" (Focus, December 2008:31).

That says it well. We believe that the Bible insists on divine grace as the means of providing ongoing cleansing and forgiving that we, as Christians, all need. This in no way negates works, because God's grace constantly moves us to serve Him with all of our being.

Chapter 6

Is There Truly a Just Person?

(Romans 3:10-12, 3:23, 4:1-8)

Introduction

Justification is well known in printers' and computer operators' circles. In fact, I just justified the heading for this chapter. It means to align the margins of a column of type — flush left, centered, flush right or fully justified. In this usage justify, means to adjust the type, so that the lines are of a correct length or follow a correct margin. Other uses of justify are to act justly toward, to show to be right or in accord with reason, to vindicate, to free from blame or declare guiltless, to absolve, to warrant, to prove qualified and to give an adequate reason for something done or to be done.

We sometimes go to endless lengths to justify our actions. We offer all kinds of excuses: "It's not my fault. It's my family, my upbringing ... I was cheated. Everyone was against me. My employer hates me. I didn't get what I have every right to. Someone got in my face, and nobody gets in my face ..." We hire lawyers to build a case for us. We claim to the court that we are not guilty — there were extenuating circumstances. We may even blame society in general, God, or the church for our problems.

Where is the truth in all of this? Could it be our fault that we are in difficulty? Or that everyone is against us? Let's look at this matter of justification from God's perspective.

Are we all out of line?

I had a colleague once in a publishing plant who claimed that he was absolutely sinless. I challenged him by answering, "Well, you just now sinned." Was I right? The Word of God says that we all sin:

"There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one ... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10-12,23).

“We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check” (James 3:2).

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Only a self-deluded person can read these passages and still claim to be absolutely sinless. Without divine help, we are all out of line; we are all unjustified.

Justification comes from the Lord

Sometimes I like to think that I am master of my computer (but not always). If I command the copy to be justified, it will be. The command comes from me, not from the computer’s hard drive. Yet, everything I have ever typed into it remains there, perhaps well-hidden. No effort on my part can permanently get rid of all of that garbage, just as long as that computer exists. This is why crime investigators can take a suspect’s computer and even restore deleted files.

In the case of our own lives, justification comes not from our own efforts to become perfect — to be permanently rid of our own garbage — but from the Lord. It is He who justifies, not we. Romans 3:21-26 teaches us that righteousness comes from God. By believing in and obeying Jesus, we are justified freely by His grace through the redemption offered us through His sacrifice on our behalf.

God doesn’t credit righteousness to us through our works, even though good works are expected of Christians (James 2:14-26).

Salvation by faith vs. salvation by works

There have been two extremes in religious thought about salvation down through the centuries. One was the predominant position through the Middle Ages — that of salvation by works. Acts of penance, charity, devotion, self-punishment — these were totaled up in an individual’s favor. The church even went so far as to sell indulgences in advance to cover sins. In other words, money paid the sinner’s way out of punishment even before a sin was committed.

Some arose to debate that doctrine. Among these were Martin Luther and John Calvin. Luther took strong exception to collecting church funds through granting indulgences. In fact, he taught that we are saved by faith, and faith only (*sola fide*). Calvin took this doctrine a step further, teaching that some are unconditionally saved and can never be lost, while others are unconditionally lost.

The idea was, “Once in grace, always in grace.” Somehow, he and others overlooked Paul’s statement to the Galatians, “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (Galatians 5:4).

Historically, we in Churches of Christ have tended to shy away from salvation by grace, or from justification by faith. Instead, we have emphasized works. My dear mother was one who appeared to be always fearful that she had not done enough to merit Heaven. None of us has done enough, if our eternity depends on our works. Righteousness and justification come through obedient faith (Romans 4:1-8).

So where is our true shelter?

The just are those who have been justified. God’s Word says that our justification comes through grace, which is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). We cannot make ourselves just, any more than a page of type can justify itself. We must place our lives in Jesus’ hands. It is He who justifies us, as we live in obedience to Him.

The just or righteous are those who live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4, Romans 1:17). Living by faith entails a life of submission and obedience to Christ. Whenever we cease to live in submission and obedience, we lose our righteousness. Jesus talks about a cleansed pig returning to his wallow in the mud. If we fall back willfully into sin, we are worse off than before. We are totally out of line and now we should know better.

Chapter 7

Are We Predestined to Be Saved or Lost?

(Joshua 24:14-15; Romans 8:28-30, 14:11-12)

Introduction

A popular idea (or excuse) is going around that “nothing is my fault. It’s my DNA.” “It’s just how I was born.” “I come from a dysfunctional family.” “I got in with the wrong crowd.” I’ve had a bunch of bad breaks ... ” And so it goes, ad nauseum. We have bought into the idea that we have just been programmed, due to birth and upbringing influences, and therefore cannot help being the way we are. This is often the argument of alcoholics, drug addicts and homosexuals.

Coupled with this is the long history of predestination, as advanced by John Calvin, John Knox and others — that we were destined from before our birth to be great or small, wealthy or poor, saved or lost. Therefore, our destiny is out of our hands — we are not responsible for our past, present or future.

At first glance in the Scriptures, it appears that each individual is known by God from even before conception and that He has predetermined that we have a certain role to play in this life (Genesis 18:10-14, Judges 13:2-14, Jeremiah 1:4-5, Luke 1:5-38, Acts 9:1-19). Isn’t that interesting? If the Lord knows us from even before our conception, what does that say about abortion? This drastic act removes a life for which the Lord may have had a special purpose. The story circulates that someone was complaining to God that He had not provided someone to invent a definitive cure for AIDS. The Lord answered, “I did, but you aborted him.”

The Bible does talk about foreordination and predestination, but in a specific sense.

What does it mean to be foreordained?

To be foreordained means to foreknow, to be chosen in advance and to

control situations to come out as intended. Only the Godhead foreknows, foreordains and governs the universe, so that what was planned from the beginning develops according to plan. Christ was chosen for His redemptive task from before the creation of the world (1 Peter 1:20).

Paul says in Romans 11:2 that God had foreknown Israel and her eventual refusal to listen to His prophets and His own Son. He did not reject His people; they rejected Him. He knew this beforehand and chose a new people to elect — Christians. Peter says in 1 Peter 1:2 that the elect are faithful followers of Christ scattered throughout the world. Then Paul says in Romans 8:28-30 that God foreknew His Chosen Ones and predestined them to be conformed to the image of His Son.

How does predestination function?

We who are Christians were predestined to enjoy a new life in Christ and an eternal future with Him. Does this mean that we as individuals were selected to be saved and others were selected to be lost? No, predestination does not rob the individual of his or her free choice. We choose to obey Christ and be saved or to turn a deaf ear to Him. Far earlier Joshua told the people of Israel to choose life or death (Joshua 24:14-15). Jesus Himself sent his Apostles into all the world to preach salvation. Those who would hear, heed and be baptized would enjoy the fruits of salvation. In Acts 2:38 Peter told a multitude of Jews to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins.

Paul wrote, “... For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” (Romans 14:10). Then he quoted passages from the Old Testament reminding his readers that every knee will bow before the Lord and every tongue will confess to God (Romans 14:11). He concluded that topic by adding, “So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Romans 14:12).

This doesn’t sound like unconditional predestination, does it? Why should anyone be judged on that day, if his or her eternal destiny was predetermined? No, predestination is a general principle. God predestined that the world would be inhabited by intelligent humans, capable of choosing between the good and the bad. Knowing that we would often choose the bad, He predestined His Son to come to earth to save us from our folly, if we will just listen to Him. God predestined the church to be His temple, body and family. So the church corporately was predestined to exist and win souls to Him, but He knew that not everyone in the church would be saved eternally. Entire churches, such as at Laodicea (Revelation

3:14ff), were at the point of being vomited from the Lord's own mouth for their wrong attitude and behavior. Yet, He preordained a way for them to return to Him, if they but repented and opened the door of their collective heart to Him. Predestination, then, is in a sense corporate — the church was predestined to eternal salvation, if it walks the walk. Individually, Christians are also predestined to receive eternal salvation, but only if we walk the walk.

So where is our true shelter?

Nothing happens in this world except by God's foreknowledge. No person serves as a king or president without His consent. No person exists except by His favor. He predestined wonderful things for humankind, yet we spurn so many of them. Or, perhaps even worse, we ignore them or merely give them lip service.

We were called by His preordination to be citizens of His glorious Kingdom.

Yet, He never forces us to accept His invitation. Our acceptance, which carries serious responsibilities, is our choice. Our predestination is conditional, not absolute. By this I mean that it is conditioned on our obedience and faithfulness, rather than on a divine stamp on us that makes us God's, whether we accept that condition or not.

Part 3

The Kingdom of Christ, His Church

Chapter 8

Does Christ Already Have a Kingdom?

(Daniel 2:44, Luke 12:31, John 3:3-5, Colossians 1:13)

Introduction

The Jews of the time of Christ ardently believed that God would restore “any day now” the long-expected kingdom of David. Being under the heel of Roman domination, their hopes continued high for the coming of their Messiah King, who would expel the invaders and restore the Kingdom, as it had been under David and Solomon. They prayed for that new great Prophet, promised by God through His spokesman, Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18-19). Taking advantage of this longing, some self-proclaimed messiahs had appeared and drawn a large followings (Acts 5:36-37).

So when Christ appeared, some believed Him to be that political-military messiah who would deliver them from their enemies (specifically, the Roman occupiers) and restore the kingdom to Israel (John 6:14-15, Acts 1:6). (Note that even the apostles believed this up to that point.)

Many evangelical and charismatic churches, along with some entire denominations, expect Jesus to return at any time to establish His earthly rule on His throne in Jerusalem. Two ladies at our door recently expressed the idea that when the Kingdom comes, there will be no more crime, and we won’t even have to have locks on our doors. The founder of a non-profit organization called Blossoming Rose wishes to hasten the day “when Jesus will establish His kingdom, headquartered in Jerusalem,” by raising funds for dispersed Jews to be brought back to Israel.

Various groups and individuals have looked to the messianic prophecy of Moses and declared themselves (or someone declared on their behalf) to be that promised Great Prophet. Muhammad was so considered. So were Joseph Smith, Charles T. Russell and many others. Even today some individuals and groups still look for a coming world leader who will be the savior of mankind and its political ruler.

The Roman Catholic Church believes the world ruler is now here, even though he cannot function nearly as powerfully as he once did. When the Pope wears his double crown, that signifies that he has both spiritual and temporal (political) rule.

Does the Kingdom of the Messiah exist today, or should we continue to watch and pray for it? Let's look at the biblical statements on this subject.

The kingdom in prophecy

- “Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom” (1 Chronicles 29:11, Psalm 22:28).
- “I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill” (Psalm 2:6).
- “Justice will be the scepter of your kingdom” (Psalm 45:6).
- “They will tell of the glory of your kingdom” (Psalm 145:10-13).
- A king would arise to sit on David's throne forever (Isaiah 9:6-7).
- The promised rulers' kingdom is “an everlasting kingdom, which shall never be destroyed” (Daniel 2:44, 4:3).
- “And the kingdom will be the Lord's” (Obadiah 21).

We can see from these passages that an eternal kingdom was promised and that a new David would rule over it. The Jewish people interpreted this to mean a literal earthly kingdom, ruled over by a descendant of David. He would bring back the glory of David and Solomon's empire and rid the Jews of their oppressors.

By the time of Christ, the expectation for a literal Messiah King to restore the kingdom to Israel was rampant, especially because the Jews were under Roman control. This explains why the people wanted to take Jesus by force and crown Him king (John 6:14-15). And it explains why the apostles asked Jesus, after more than three years with Him and just before His ascension, if He was going right then restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6).

Only on and following Pentecost, in Acts 2, did they begin to understand that Jesus' Kingdom was not of this world. It was a spiritual Kingdom, open to those of every nation and language.

The Kingdom described in the New Testament

The kingdom of Christ is an all-important theme in the New Testament.

Here are some of the passages that develop the nature of the kingdom:

- The message of John the Baptist was to repent, “for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). This was the same message preached early on by Jesus (Matthew 4:17,23). We see by these passages that repentance is necessary for entry into the Kingdom.
- Entry into the Kingdom requires righteousness (Matthew 5:20).
- The Kingdom is like seed, yeast or a net thrown into the water (Matthew 13:1-51). It germinates, produces results, leavens and draws people to it.
- Those instructed about the Kingdom bring forth new treasures, as well as old (Matthew 13:52). They would have the Old Testament treasure, as well as the new revelations through Christ, from which to draw.
- Peter was given the keys of the Kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19). In Greek the word Peter was petros, a small stone, whereas the rock on which Christ would build His church was petra, a rock mass. The ancient city of Petra, carved out of rock cliffs, derived its name from this second Greek word. Peter was not the founder of the church, nor its first pope. He was only the disciple who first confessed Christ as the Son of God (Matthew 16:16) and was therefore given the privilege to first preach the terms of entry into the Kingdom, both to the Jews and to Gentiles (Acts 2, 10). Jesus said He would build His church upon petra, not petros. It would be Christ’s, not Peter’s.
- Greatness in the Kingdom is not based on wealth, education or prestige, but on humility and straightforwardness (Matthew 18:1-4).
- We are to seek first the kingdom above all other things (Luke 12:31).
- The Kingdom of God is within us (Luke 17:21). It is not a kingdom of this world, nor a visible entity. It lives through the lives of its citizens.
- A new birth is required for entry into the Kingdom (John 3:3-5).
- Christ’s Kingdom is not of this world — neither material nor political (John 18:36.)

- We enter the Kingdom through much tribulation (Acts 14:22). The path is not easy, neither upon entry nor upon continuing on this course.
- The apostles preached the Gospel of the Kingdom (Acts 19:8, 20:25, 28:31). They preached good news about Christ and His kingship.
- The Kingdom is not food and drink, but power from above (1 Corinthians 4:20).
- Christ will deliver the Kingdom back to God at the end of time (1 Corinthians 15:24).
- We have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the Kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13). Notice that this passage is in the past tense, not the future tense — We have been rescued and brought into the Kingdom. The Kingdom was already in existence when Paul wrote this.
- We have been called into the Kingdom (1 Thessalonians 2:12). Again, a continuous action, from the past to the present.
- Christians were receiving a Kingdom which cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:28).
- The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord (Revelation 11:15). Christ's Kingdom is conquering wherever it goes.

So where is our true shelter?

The Jews misunderstood the Kingdom's nature and killed the King. Religious leaders and groups ever since have misunderstood the Kingdom.

They make it political or physical. They make it a future entity. They have Jesus returning to earth to reign over a literal kingdom for a thousand years.

Yet, clearly, the Kingdom is not of this world and it exists now, as well as in the future here and in Heaven. It has been in existence in its Christian phase since Acts 2. Early Christians were rescued from darkness and brought into the Kingdom. They were born into it. Birth is the only means of entry into this Kingdom (Acts 2:38). No one can slip over the border and sneak into it. It is a spiritual Kingdom, for the spiritual-minded, not a political or material kingdom. It will continue until the end of time, when

Christ will hand the Kingdom back to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24). We don't know when time will end, but we are assured that it will. Meanwhile, we are to serve diligently in the Kingdom, awaiting our Lords' return.

Chapter 9

Word Pictures About the Kingdom

(Matthew 13:1-52)

Introduction

One of the major characteristics of Jesus' teaching was His use of parables — word pictures from common, everyday things — to illustrate important spiritual lessons. Throughout the Gospels He used parables. One purpose for them was to hide the truth from those who didn't want to understand it and to reveal the truth in an unforgettable way to those who hungered for it. We would do well to use parables from today more in our teaching and preaching. My experience in Brazil soon taught me that many of my illustrations from the U.S. did not fit the cultural situation there, so over time, I had to develop new parables and illustrations, based on Brazilian life and experience. Isn't this what Jesus did? His illustrations and parables were always within the context of Jewish life.

Matthew 13 is almost totally dedicated to relating a series of very practical parables Jesus presented to the multitudes that followed Him. These are:

The Parable of the Soils (13:1-23)

The first parable in this chapter is called the Parable of the Sower, but it is really about four different kinds of soil. The Kingdom is like a man sowing seed in a field. In those days they broadcast the seed by hand, so where it landed was not easily controllable. The sower is dedicated and the seed is good. The problem is with the soils. Some seed fell on the path and couldn't penetrate the ground, so the birds made quick work of it. Some fell on rocky places, where the soil was thin. It sprang up quickly, but was soon scorched for lack of roots, nutrition and moisture. Some fell among thorns which choked out the seed. Finally, some fell on good ground and produced an abundant crop.

The disciples were perplexed over Jesus' parables, asking Him why He

always taught in this way. His answer was that they had the knowledge to understand His teaching, but the crowds did not. Then He told them that whoever has will be given more and whoever does not have will end up with even less. What does this mean? Those who continue to grow in Bible knowledge and understanding, putting it into practice, will be ready to receive even more understanding.

Others hear or read the same thing and do not profit from it. Seeing, they don't see; hearing, they don't hear. Jesus then used a scathing passage from Isaiah 6:9-10 to show what was happening even as He spoke. Some people hear the Gospel but never perceive; never understand; never act on it. They are spiritually deaf and blind. The disciples were blessed because they were beginning to see and hear.

Jesus then explained the parable to them. Those who hear the message of Christ and do not understand or accept it will lose the opportunity to receive it. Satan will snatch it away from them. The rocky place is the person who hears and perhaps obeys out of impulse, but has no spiritual roots. Recently a young man was baptized after only a few hours of instruction. I pray that his heart is not rocky soil, without sufficient root to grow in the faith. The first sign of trouble and the rootless disciple is out of there. The thorny soil is the person who really wants to follow Jesus, but the cares of the world choke out his or her dedication. The good soil is the person who hears, understands, obeys and remains faithful and fruitful from then on. He or she brings in a steady harvest of good deeds for the Lord.

The Parable of the tares or weeds (13:24-30).

This parable is also about sowing the good seed (the Word of God) in a field. All was set for good growth, but then the enemy came and sowed bad seed in the field. When the wheat sprouted, tares also appeared. Tares are deceptive. They look a lot like wheat, but don't produce usable seed. They just choke out some of the wheat and bleed the soil. The owner's workers asked about this, "Didn't you sow good seed. Where did all of these tares come from? Do you want us to pull them up?" His answer was, "No, let them grow until the harvest. If you try to pull them up now, you may pull up some wheat by accident. At the harvest the tares will be separated and burned."

Again, the disciples didn't catch the meaning of the parable, so Jesus explained: The sower is the Lord. The field is the world. The good seed is the sons of the Kingdom. The tares are worldly people, sons of the Evil

One. The enemy is the devil. The harvest is the end of the world and the harvesters are God's angels. Jesus will send His angels on the Last Day to separate out of His kingdom all who are evil. They will be destroyed eternally, but the righteous will shine as the sun.

The Parable of the Net (13:47-52)

This parable is much like the one above. The Kingdom catches all kinds of fish. At a fishing village on the Brazilian coast, we used to watch the fishermen bring in huge dragnets and separate the good fish from the bad. In like manner, at the end of time the angels will separate out of the Kingdom the bad fish. Not everyone who claims to be a true Christian will be kept by the Lord; only those who are genuinely true in every regard.

Then Jesus said that if we are instructed about the Kingdom and apply what we learn, we will bring from His storeroom new treasures as well as old. Every time I read the Bible through, I find passages in it that I am sure were not there before. Well, they were, but I didn't yet have sufficient spiritual understanding or maturity to see them.

Four other parables about the Kingdom (13:31-33, 44-46)

The kingdom is like a mustard seed, the tiniest of all seeds. Yet it can grow to tree proportions, big enough to give birds shelter. We have seen this happen in country after country — humble beginnings of the Kingdom, but amazing growth.

The Kingdom is like yeast placed in dough. It permeates and influences all of the dough. The Kingdom by nature has a powerful positive influence on the world, if we give it a chance to spread.

The Kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field. A family found an entire mastadon skeleton under a pond on their property. What a treasure! Its sale to a museum brought the family more money than it had ever dreamed of. Yet, our Lord's Kingdom is far more precious. It is priceless. Jesus said it is so valuable that we should be willing to sacrifice all to inherit it.

The Kingdom is like a pearl of great value. When a merchant found that perfect pearl, he sold everything else and bought it. In like manner we should value Christ and His kingdom above all else.

So where is our true shelter?

The Kingdom Christ offers us is the most enduring entity in all history. It will never pass away, but will be taken into Heaven at the Judgment

(Daniel 2:44, 1 Corinthians 15:24). We all want to be part of something permanent, do we not? Then, let us give our hearts to Jesus. In Him we have a permanent citizenship in His eternal Kingdom.

Chapter 10

Does Christ Have a Body?

(Ephesians 4:4, 5:22ff; Colossians 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23)

Introduction

Ah, words! They can clarify or cut. They can build up or destroy. They are the framework around the skeleton of our thoughts. Arthur Scargill, British trades union leader, commented on the power of words: “My father still reads the dictionary every day. He says your life depends on your power to master words” (Sunday Times, January 10, 1982).

One point of confusion about words is that the same expression can have multiple meanings. Take the word, “body,” for instance. It can mean,

- A physical body
- A body of water
- A foreign body
- A legislative body
- A body of people of like mind or interest

When we talk about the body of Christ, we can be referring to His physical or heavenly body, but also to His body of believers. In this chapter we are talking about the people who make up His spiritual body.

The nature of Christ’s spiritual body

- This body has but one head (Ephesians 5:23, Colossians 1:18). Headship means authority, direction, control. When our head gets out of sync, the entire body begins to malfunction. In the case of Christ’s headship, He is never out of control; never makes a wrong decision. He is the divine authority over the Kingdom, the church. He told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). The Pope wears at times a double crown, symbolizing both spiritual and political power. Not so with Christ.

He wears but one crown, which symbolizes His spiritual power over His body. He has the final Word in the church and in our lives. The entire church worldwide receives its life and stimulation from Christ (Ephesians 5:25-27).

- This body is one (Ephesians 4:4). Many religious teachers, writers and even scholars believe that Christ has many different bodies, such as Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran ... and thousands of others. They say that the members mentioned in Ephesians 4 are different denominations. However, the language of Ephesians 4:11-16 makes it clear that He has but one body, composed of many individuals, not separate religious groups. In our Oklahoma City region there are literally hundreds of different religious bodies. According to the Bible, how many different bodies does Christ have? Just one! This is one of Paul's favorite descriptions of the church. In Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 he emphasizes the oneness of the body, composed of many members, with each contributing his or her part to the functioning of the whole body.

- This body has a personal relationship with both Christ and among all its members, a relationship compared to that of husband and wife (Ephesians 5:29-30). He feeds the church. He saves the church. And the church responds favorably to His saving and sustaining hand by serving Him and caring for each of His children.

- This body also has a corporate identity, in which the entire membership worldwide is seen as one, regardless of race, class, language or cultural level. The body is whole because Christ is its head (as in the example Christ gave of the vine and the branches in John 15:5-6). When we prune a tree, the cut limbs begin to die immediately, because they are cut off from the source of their energy. Jesus is the creative source of the church. It has its beginning and life in Him. So without Christ the church has no spiritual energy. It is nothing — merely another fraternal organization.

Who is in this body? Everyone who has been baptized for the remission of sins and in this act has been born into Christ's body or kingdom (John 3:5, Acts 2:38, 1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 3:9-10). We cannot know all of those who have been born again. In fact, we cannot know if the candidate for baptism has truly believed and has truly repented. This is in the Lord's hands. All we know is what the Lord requires for entry into His body.

- Each of us has a responsibility both to the Head and to the body (Ephesians 2:19-22, 4:1-6; Romans 12:3-21; 1 Corinthians 12:27-31). We

are connected inseparably with the Head, but also with the other members of the body. I lost a finger at age 2, which meant, and still means, that my right hand is weakened. The hand is still connected with the head, but one of its members is missing. Each of us has gifts and abilities that are unique and essential to the success of the church. A song leader cannot say to the member who cleans the building that he has no need of that brother. We all need each other. We must be totally responsive to Christ, our Head, but also totally sensitive to the service, growth and needs of our fellow members (Ephesians 4:25). We must learn better than we have until now to love each other sincerely and be ready to serve each other (1 John 3:11-24).

- This body is a place of love, peace, reconciliation and salvation, not gossip, enmity, strife, or division (1 Corinthians 13, Ephesians 2:14-18, Colossians 3:15-17). The first four build up; the latter four tear down. Baptism places us by birth into that body. The Lord's Supper not only tells us to honor Christ and examine ourselves as we partake, but also to discern the body — not just the body of Christ on the cross, but the body of believers about us. Jesus tells us to be reconciled to our brothers before He will accept our worship or gift (Matthew 5:21-24). Christian ethics of the highest order is called for here.

- This body is called the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22ff). The intimacy between Christ and the church is paralleled in the intimacy of human marriage. As two humans become one in marriage, so Christ and the church become one in spiritual union. His love and authority are met with sacrificial love and submission on the part of the church. Christ is not an arbitrary, authoritative head. His authority is based on love, the kind of love to which we can respond with submission and service. The result should be the church without spot or wrinkle (Ephesians 5:26f), presented to her divine Husband as a bride adorned in white for her wedding.

- This body is also compared to a building, a temple and a city (Ephesians 4:16, Revelation 21:9ff, 1 Corinthians 3:9, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Ephesians 2:19-22, 1 Peter 2:5). Just as the tabernacle was to be built exactly according to God's plan, so the church is built according to His plan (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). Jesus is the cornerstone of this building and gives it cohesion (1 Corinthians 3:11, Ephesians 2:20). We are living stones in His temple (1 Peter 2:5). This body is a spiritual house, not a material building. Our Lord dwells in it and that is what makes it holy.

So where is our true shelter?

Christ and His church are portrayed in the most intimate relationship in Ephesians. The church was not an afterthought nor an appendage to the Kingdom. It has no independent life but has its spiritual existence through union with Christ and its submission to Him. Whenever it goes its own way, seeking to become its own authority, it stands forsaken by Christ. All that we members do is done in the church and not just when it meets for worship. Our daily relationship to each other is part of our total relationship to Christ, because His body is a corporate and family reality.

This we believe: Christ created His body, the church. It is one body only, composed of individual members, rather than a multitude of denominations. Division in the body is severely condemned in Scripture. Jesus prayed in John 17 that all of His followers be one, even as He and the Father are one. Therefore, division into countless sects is contrary to His will. We are the body of Christ only if we are born into that body and act as responsible members of it.

Chapter 11

The Nature of the Church

(Romans 8:28, Ephesians 2:19-20, 1 John 1:5-7)

Introduction

My father-in-law, who was never involved in any church, had a pet expression, “See you in church!” In fact, my wife Margie had no church background until some junior high classmates invited her to attend services with them. I praise the Lord for that. If they hadn’t led her to Christ, we would not have met.

The word “church” means different things, but often stands for a meeting place, which is an erroneous concept. In the Greek Bible the word for church is *ekklesia*, meaning a group of people in a particular setting (1 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:2).

This word is also used for a formal body of local churches, joined by a common structure and doctrine. The New Testament uses the word at times in this way (Matthew 16:18, Acts 20:28, Hebrews 12:22-24).

The church as the “called-out”

One distinctive feature of the church is that it is composed of those who have been called. Just as the Lord called out Israel from Egyptian slavery to the Promised Land, so He calls His people today out of slavery to sin, inviting them into His Kingdom (Acts 2:39, Romans 8:28, 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12, 1 Peter 2:9). God calls us through Christ, His Spirit and His Word to follow Him. We can reject His call, as many do (Acts 13:46-48, 28:25-28). Or, having once heard His call and obeyed it, we can turn away from it (Galatians 1:6-7). This latter condition is even more dangerous than the first, for we now know what we should be doing and ignore it.

Is the Lord’s call limited? It would almost appear so, according to Acts 2:39.

We do know that God wants all to be saved, according to 1 Peter 3:9.

But we also know that He knows every heart. He knows beforehand who will heed His call and who will not. The ones who will heed His call are appointed beforehand to be saved.

The church and Christians as light

As a called-out people we hold a most honored place in the Lord's sight. We have left the darkness behind and now walk in His light (1 John 1:5-7). Light here symbolizes spiritual illumination. As a global positioning system, the light of Christ directs our pathway to eternity. Not only this, we are the light of the world, as we reflect His light in our own lives (Matthew 5:14-16). We are to let our light shine in Christian behavior and service, so that others will respect this light and glorify God because of it.

Don Vinzant, senior minister for the Edmond, Oklahoma, church, recently commented that Edmond is a "lighthouse church." In other words, it shows both to its fellowship and to the world how a church should be. This doesn't mean that the Edmond church is perfect, because sometimes light keepers fail to shine as they should. However, it is very visible and others watch it, both to follow its example and to find fault with it. Good behavior is noted, and also bad behavior. When a member's light shines especially brightly, we rejoice with that member. On the other hand, when a member's light flickers and goes out, we all mourn this and attempt to help that person rekindle his or her light.

Does the world need our Lord's light? As never before! Isaiah 5:20 describes our own age: Many today call darkness light and light darkness. Isaiah says in Isaiah 9:1-2 that light would one day return to those walking in darkness, in the person of Jesus. It is our primary task as the church to make sure that His light shines brightly in our world.

The church as a family

The concept of family as husband, wife and kids, and extended family, is slowly disappearing. Now, a single mom attempting to bring up her children alone is a widespread phenomenon, so much so that two-thirds of African-American homes are now headed by single moms, or single moms and live-in boyfriend. A third or more of white homes are in the same fix. When my wife's brother died, we journeyed to Omaha, Nebraska, to attend the funeral. He had nine children by two wives, so there was a multitude present. So many family members had married and remarried, or had brought children into the world without the benefit of marriage, we were confused by all of the matches and mismatches among those present.

Because this seems to be more and more the trend, it is doubly important for Christian families to demonstrate the covenant love and faithfulness that the Lord expects of all families. Bible writers condemn unfaithfulness in marriage. They denounce couples' violation of their marriage covenant (Proverbs 2:17, Malachi 2:13-15). "Until death do us part" should be on our lips and in our hearts continually, not just for the sake of healthy families, or for the sake of a good example, but also for the sake of the sanctity of covenant love. Margie and I have been married 60 years. Never once has she considered divorce, but at times may have wanted to kill me! Thankfully, she hasn't, so we remain together until death parts us.

There is yet another reason for marital fidelity among Christians: Our example of faithful marriage is to reflect the faithfulness of Christ to His Bride, the church, and to all who are in this body (Revelation 21:2, 21:9). Christians who violate their covenantal vows not only destroy their marriage, but also give a black eye to the church.

Returning to the matter of the church as the family or household of Christ, Paul says that we are named after our Lord, who is the head of the family (Ephesians 2:15). We are the Lord's household, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:19-22, and as the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 3:6. In the Ephesian passage Paul adds to the figure of household by saying that we are God's building, His temple. He says that, since we are God's temple and the dwelling place of His Spirit, we must maintain this temple, corporately and individually, in a holy manner.

As God's family, we are responsible to love and care for each other, at not just the *fileo* (brotherly) level, but much more so at the *agape* (sacrificial love) level. In such a loving, sacrificing family, there is no room for gossip, backbiting, slander, bitterness, feuding or dividing (2 Corinthians 12:20).

So where is our true shelter?

The biblical nature of the church makes it unique in the world. In a world of "dog eat dog" of the first century, those outside of the church marveled, commenting, "Look how they love one another." Sacrificial love was almost "from another planet."

We believe that the church today must be unique, again in a "dog-eat-dog" society. We must still be the "called-out," the world's light bearers and the true family of God. This kind of church will still stand out as something very special and worthy of its purchase price.

Chapter 12

The Structure of the Church

(Ephesians 1:22, 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:1-13)

Introduction

Every organization and organism has a structure. They vary in organizational style, but most have a CEO or president. They have vice-presidents, department heads and leaders or foremen of smaller units. Every organism has structure, some of it extremely complex. It is the structure that holds the organism together and enables it to function.

Christianity is no exception. Some people believe the Church to be a physical building at a specific location. This is not the Church. Jesus said that the church is people: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst” (Matthew 18:20).

All religious groups are composed of their members and have an administrative structure. The difficulty is that they may vary considerably in their style of organization. For instance, there is the episcopal model, which is governed by a body of bishops. Examples are the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Episcopalian churches, with the Roman Catholic adding to this structure a system of arch-bishops, cardinals and popes, copying the ancient Roman Empire model. Then there is the presbyterian model, with bodies of elders ruling over the church in general, epitomized by the Presbyterian Church. There is also the local autonomy model, in which individual congregations run their own affairs, but often with a national hierarchy determining general denominational directions. The Baptist churches follow this model.

Most Protestant and Evangelical churches have a pastor, often appointed by the hierarchy and serving as the official head of the local congregation. If they have elders, these are generally in subjection to the pastor. Some churches have a board of deacons that cares for the official business operations of the group.

Do any of these models fit what we read in the New Testament about the structure of the church? Let us find out.

Christ the Head of the Church

The New Testament makes it clear that the church has but one Head, Jesus Christ:

“And God placed all things under his (Christ’s) feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:22).

That is perfectly clear, isn’t it? The church has but one head and all who are connected to that head obey His commands. There is no mediator between Him and His children. He is the only Mediator that we have before the throne of God.

He is the owner and husband of the church, which is His body and bride.

Organic structure of the church

As the Master of the church, what kind of organization did He provide for its functioning?

First, there is no hint in the New Testament of a structure higher than that of the local church. The only case mentioned that could even come close to that is in Acts 15, when the problem of Christian liberty vs. slavery to circumcision arose and threatened to destroy the young body of believers. This matter was resolved by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. In all other circumstances described in the New Testament, each local church answered to Christ and not to a legislative body somewhere else.

The Lord Himself provides all of the gifted people needed for the spiritual growth of the church. These include evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11). None of these offices is to be held simply as honorary positions or by those who are not qualified or do not fulfill the duties ascribed to them.

Local churches had a plurality of elders, who led their flock (Acts 15:23, 20:13-35; Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, 1 Peter 5:1-4). The apostles ordained elders in every city and/or church. Never is there any mention of elders ruling over a body of churches.

Elders were to be shepherds (pastors), overseers (bishops), presbyters (leaders), teachers, exhorters, at times disciplinarians and guardians of the faith.

They were to be men filled with the Spirit, the husbands of one wife and fathers whose children were disciplined and faithful. They were to set an example of Christian character, not given to wine or any behavior that could be counterproductive in their service to the Lord. Those who taught continually could be supported financially (1 Timothy 5:17). They were to exhort and encourage their local flock. They were not to become bogged down with physical and material details of their congregation's work, but to entrust that kind of duty to deacons and other reliable servants.

Deacons were appointed to care for the material aspects of the work. The prototype for this service is seen in Acts 6:1-6, when seven wise and Spirit-filled men were chosen to care for the needs of the Grecian widows in the Jerusalem church. Deacons' qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, where they and their wives are to be holy, sincere and worthy of respect, among other qualities.

Evangelists are to be given to evangelizing (soul winning) and teaching (1 Timothy 4:6-16). They are to be an example by their life, love, faith and purity. They are to devote themselves to public reading and teaching of the Scriptures. They are to be diligent, growing in the Faith and in their capacity as evangelists. Our present-day practice of hiring men to engage in this service and to also do almost all of the public preaching, hospital visiting, counseling those in difficulties of different kinds and even administering the church office gives them little time and energy left to evangelize.

Finally, there are teachers qualified and experienced in the Faith, whose task it is to transmit the Word of God to others clearly and biblically. Of course, they must have a sound doctrinal base on which to stand and must learn how to teach that base effectively. Most congregations have a lack of experienced and capable teachers, so it is nearly always necessary to provide potential teachers with the tools they need for doing an exceptional job in their classrooms.

So where is our true shelter?

Only the God-given leadership for local churches is the safe course to follow. Historically, when superstructures were imposed on the churches, the body of Christ began to change into a political organization. That situation gave great power to a few men, who then added doctrines they created to the belief-system of the church. This still goes on, with councils, annual conventions and other meetings of top leadership announcing new

doctrines and practices for their churches. For a time, one of my nieces was in a religious body that taught continuous revelation incorporated into the doctrine of that group. She commented that she could hardly wait for the next big revelation.

The Lord knew what He was doing when He limited church structure to individual congregations. One can aid another congregation or even advise another one, but cannot dictate what that congregation can or cannot do. In addition, no para-church organization or school, as vital as it may be, has the right to make demands on local churches.

Let us avoid at all costs the tendency to add to New Testament doctrine or to create new systems of church government. Let us do all within our power to help prepare qualified elders, deacons, evangelists and teachers for our churches. And then let us expect them to serve with all diligence and faithfulness to God's Word.

Chapter 13

How to Be Born into Christ's Family

(John 1:12, 3:3-5; 1 John 3:9-10)

Introduction

As in all other aspects of religious doctrine and practice, there is wide diversity over the process of becoming a member of a particular religious group. For some, such as Catholicism, the Orthodox churches, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and others, physical birth in a family of that faith is tantamount to being a member of it. Example: In Islam, when a baby is born, the father whispers the shahada (the statement of faith in Allah and Muhammad as His prophet) in the child's ear, thus conferring the faith on that infant.

In the Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal, Lutheran and other groups, a baby receives sprinkling or pouring of water on its head as baptism to remove original sin and incorporate the newborn into the faith. In the Orthodox churches the baby is immersed three times in water, once each in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Immersion is practiced in Baptist and certain other churches, but not for salvation or remission of sins — rather, to incorporate the individual already saved by faith into the church. In many evangelical and charismatic churches conversion consists of repeating the “sinner’s prayer.”

Churches of Christ are among the very few that immerse for the remission of sins, following faith, public confession of that faith and repentance of sins. Among all of these means of incorporation into religious bodies, which is biblically correct? Let's look at the Scriptures to find out.

Faith the foundation

Beyond the redemptive work of Christ, faith on the individual's part is the foundation on which any conversion is built. Hebrews 11:6 says that “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes

to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” And Mark 16:16 adds, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

Faith is much more than mere belief that God exists. James tells us, with a bit of irony, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the devils believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). Hebrews 11:6 lists two requirements for faith to be acceptable to God: Belief that He exists and belief that He rewards earnest seekers of Him and His will for our lives. So faith is active, not passive, and is for those mature enough to believe and act upon that belief.

How is faith acquired? By hearing (actual audio reception), seeing, reading or otherwise receiving and accepting God’s Word (Romans 10:17). Every human being can know that there is an all-powerful Creator God. Paul says in Romans 1:18-20 that we are without excuse, if we do not believe in His eternal power and divine nature. Psalms 8 and 19 extol the wonders of God’s creation, visual proofs of His power.

Everyone can believe that there is a supreme God through seeing His creation all about us, but no one can believe, without help, in what He has done to make salvation possible for us through Christ. The entire concept of a loving Savior sent by God to give His life as a ransom for our sins cannot be conceived randomly. It must be revealed through one kind or another of communication. Faith in Christ comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17).

Repentance

For a lot of people repentance is an ugly word. It requires an honest look at self, remorse over thoughts and actions that are contrary to God’s will, and then a bold action involving expression of the sin or sins behind the remorse, and a firm decision to make amends. A good example of remorse without repentance is the case of Judas Iscariot. He was extremely remorseful over having betrayed Christ, but his remorse led him to commit suicide, rather than repent and change his ways (Matthew 27:3-5). A good example of remorse which led to repentance and renewed life in Christ is Peter. He denied the Lord, but when the cock crowed, exactly as Jesus had predicted, remorse crushed him, he repented and only 50 days later led the apostles in preaching on the Day of Pentecost (Matthew 26:69-75, Acts 1 and 2).

Peter told a multitude in Acts 2:38 to repent and be baptized for the

forgiveness of their sins. Jesus had said in Luke 24:47 that repentance and remission of sins were to be preached in His name. In Acts 2 Peter fulfilled for the first time those marching orders of Jesus.

True repentance leads to a changed life and not just being sorry for or embarrassed by our sins. Today little emphasis is given to repentance as an essential step in the conversion process. Belief, confession of that belief (or at least agreeing to the question asked about one's belief) and baptism are emphasized, but not repentance. The person deciding to become a Christian must be clearly shown the necessity of recognizing and turning from his or her sinful life. This step probably doesn't occur instantaneously. It takes time to dig up and recognize our sins for what they are, and then make a conscious decision to leave them behind. Unless this is done, it is doubtful that true conversion has taken place.

Confession

Confession can mean public acknowledgement of sin, which is essential to our cleansing from sin. But it can also mean, as it does in the process of our conversion, public confession of faith in Christ (Matthew 10:32-33, Romans 10:8-10). This signifies a statement before others of our belief. We take a public stand for Christ. When I baptize, I prefer that the candidate for baptism state or repeat his or her faith in Christ and not merely assent to the fact.

Public confession of faith in Christ has often been, throughout history, tantamount to a death sentence. When Christians in the first to early in the fourth century were confronted with the demand to confess Caesar as Lord, their answer was, "No, Jesus is Lord." This often led to their martyrdom, just as it sometimes does even today in certain parts of the world. Public confession of faith in Christ, then, is a courageous step of both loyalty and honor.

Baptism

Baptism has an interesting history. Its meaning in Greek was to immerse (to dip or to plunge). John the Baptist dipped people in the Jordan River, because there was much water there (John 3:23). The baptism he preached was a call to repentance, in preparation for the coming of Christ and His Kingdom. Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus in John 3:3-5 teaches us that we must be born of water and the Spirit, in order to enter the Kingdom. Just as a fetus is born of the water of its mother's womb, so we are born of water and of the life-giving Spirit into Christ's Kingdom. The apostles and

early church practiced the baptism ordered by Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 16:15-16). These passages present the Great Commission that Jesus gave to the apostles. It has four steps — proclamation, belief, baptism and follow-up instruction.

The first example of baptism practiced by the church is seen in Acts 2, following Peter's sermon, in which he told the people present to repent and be baptized for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38), and some 3,000 were baptized. Other examples in Acts include 8:36-39 (an Ethiopian official), 9:17-18 (Saul of Tarsus), 10:44-48 (Cornelius and his household), 16:13-15 (Lydia and her household), 16:29-34, (the Philippian jailor and his family) and 22:16 (again, Saul of Tarsus). In each of these cases the believing and repentant candidates for baptism were immersed for the remission of their sins.

What else does the New Testament say about baptism? In Romans 6:1-7 Paul describes baptism as a burial in water of the old person of sin and the resurrection of a new person in Christ. He describes baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13 as a baptism by one Spirit into one body. In Colossians 2:12 he calls baptism a burial and resurrection through faith in the power of God. Hebrews 10:22 teaches us the necessity of having our bodies washed with pure water, symbolized in the Law of Moses by the sacrifices being washed before being offered to God. In 1 Peter 1:23 we read that we have been born again of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. In 1 Peter 3:18-22 we find that Noah and his family were saved by water, which symbolized the saving baptism of the New Testament.

Despite all the teaching about baptism, the church slowly moved away from it. The notion developed that children inherited the guilt of their parents, going back to the original sin of Adam. Therefore, church leaders argued, if a baby or little child were to die, he or she would die in sin and be lost. To guard against that possibility, every baby was to be baptized. At first it was a burial in water, a practice still followed by the Orthodox Church. Then it became a ceremony of pouring water on the baby's head, and finally sprinkling water on the head. All of this came about in spite of clear Bible teaching to the contrary (Ezekiel 18:17-21). Babies do not inherit the guilt of those before them. Therefore, they are free of sin and not accountable to God for any sin until they become a responsible human being. Jesus told adults to become like little children, if they were to enter the Kingdom. Obviously, He considered little children to be innocent.

Baptism, then, is only for those who believe in Jesus and His Word. It is only for people who are conscious of their sins and repent of them. It is only for those who can confess their sins and their faith in Christ. This point of accountability for our lives is arrived at a different time by different people. Much depends on what they have seen, heard and learned. It depends on their understanding of sin and the need for salvation. Baptism is not for infants, but for those who realize their sinful life, repent of it and confess their faith in Christ. Acts 2:38 says that baptism is for the remission of sins, but we have to be old enough to recognize our sinful condition and repent of it.

Baptism is not for official entry into a particular church, which some religious groups practice. It is for dying to sin and being born into a new life in Christ. Then the Lord adds that reborn person to His church (Acts 2:47).

So where is our true shelter?

This we believe: Christ has a Body, the church. We gain membership in it, not by human birth, nor by a rite enacted on us in infancy, but by being born into it through faith, repentance, confession and baptism. Each step involved in this new birth is absolutely essential. We dare not diminish the role of baptism, which some are doing these days, in an apparent effort to soften God's requirements for entry into His kingdom.

My prayer is that we each take this chapter to heart and act on it, if we haven't yet done so. We can enter the Body only by being born into it, as a conscious act of faith. For those of us who long since have been baptized, let us renew our faith in Christ and live a life worthy of membership in His body. It is a glorious Body, even though some members on occasion act as if they were renegades. This Body offers all of the blessings of familyhood that Christ has provided. Let us use them to the fullest.

Chapter 14

The Real Purposes of the Church

**(Acts 8:4, 1 Corinthians 12:26, Ephesians 5:22-33,
James 1:27, 1 Peter 2:5-8)**

Introduction

Why does the church exist? What are its real purposes? Is it a quasi-political entity? A benevolent society? A source for a “healing” or a free handout? A fraternal organization? A social club? An exclusive family? Some churches are partially these or all of these.

Yet, Jesus tells us that His Kingdom is not of this world; it is not a political kingdom (John 18:36). One of our congregations in Brazil was heavily into benevolence, distributing tons of USAID food to hundreds of people. They flocked to that church, but when the U.S. cut off the supply of free food, the church dwindled quickly to a mere handful of people. Do you remember what Jesus said in John 6:26-27 about seeking free physical food? Read it again, if you don’t recall.

Is what we can get out of the church materially a valid reason for the church’s existence and purposes? Let’s take a look at what the Word has to tell us about the church:

It serves as Christ’s bride here on earth.

Yes, Jesus is married, but not to Mary Magdalene, as some wild-thinking writers have proposed. He is married to His church (Ephesians 5:22-33; Revelation 19:6-8, 22:17). This is an intimate spiritual relationship which calls for total love and commitment on the part of the church to her Husband. Commitment? This is almost a lost characteristic in today’s world, in which promises, contracts and covenants are easily made and just as easily broken. “Until death do us part” is just as applicable to Christians in our relationship to Christ as it is to human marriage.

As Christ’s bride, she is not to have any stains on her wedding gown; no

spots, wrinkles or blemishes. This means a pure and holy life on the part of all of her members — difficult to realize but still required.

As His bride, she gives Christ children. Margie gave me four sons. When she announced her first pregnancy, she told me, “Honey, you’re going to be a father.” When she revealed her fourth pregnancy, she said, “Well, Father!” In the case of the church, our bringing new souls to Christ should continually be accompanied by, “Lord, you are again a Father.” In this area of service, many churches are weak, averaging no more than a handful of adult conversions a year. Put in mathematical terms, it seems to take between 100 and 200 members to bring one soul to Christ. Surely this cannot be an acceptable birth rate in the Lord’s eyes.

The church serves as a closely-knit family

Until more recent times families stayed together. This was certainly true in Bible days, when extended families tended to live together in the same house or adjoining houses. For many years my maternal grandparents kept three of their four children and the grandkids nearby in their country community. My paternal grandparents did the same with most of their children. But now? Both families are well scattered. Our six children are spread out from Texas to Oregon. We envy you who have grandkids nearby.

There was a time when families came to the aid of their own. This is still true in some cases; other not. Our own children are quick to provide help and encouragement to any of the family and, especially, to their parents. It is gratifying to now be receiving at times rather than giving to our family, as we did for so many years.

The church as the Lord intended it to be is a closely-knit family. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:26, “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” If one part leaves the fellowship, we mourn and pray, hoping that the lost sheep will return to the fold.

Paul was talking in 1 Corinthians 12 about the church and its members. Every one of us is connected to all of the rest of us, for we are fellow members of one body, the church. This means that we can never justifiably engage in backbiting, undermining, gossiping and in any other way diminishing our intimate relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Only in extreme cases must we take action to disfellowship a member, and then only if that erring member refuses to change his or her ways.

Every member has his or her unique role to play in the church, again as Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 12. That is why it is so sad to see a member “church hop,” fall away or fail to fulfill his or her God-given function in the church. All of us are essential to the functioning of the church as a whole. We may be preachers, soul-winners, teachers, elders, deacons, song leaders, people capable of caring for the needs of others ... We are all essential to the proper working of the body. It is weakened whenever any member leaves it, for whatever reason. We all must nurture and encourage each other, if the church is to serve as it should.

The church serves as a building

No, a church building is not the church. An adequate facility is most important for stability and longevity in a community, but the church is actually a spiritual building, made up of living stones, with Christ as the cornerstone from which it receives its orientation (1 Peter 2:5-8). In laying out a structure, surveyors begin with one corner and orient their measurements from it. In ancient times, and perhaps still today in some cases, a cornerstone was laid as a first step in constructing the walls. The cornerstone was the point of orientation for the entire building.

Likewise, Christ is the chief cornerstone of the entire church structure. This was prophesied in Isaiah 28:16. Its fulfillment was realized in Christ, as repeated by Peter in 1 Peter 2:6. Christ is God’s chief cornerstone, from whom we receive all of our direction. There is no hierarchy, synod, conference, convention or other governing organization — only Christ. Elders of local churches are responsible to the Lord for them. They do not have authority over any other congregation.

Sadly, our Cornerstone was rejected by His own people, according to Acts 4:12 and 1 Peter 2:7. That very Cornerstone became the foundation on which all of the Christian building or house of God stands. The rejecters’ descendants still cast Him aside, as do other religious groups and peoples, but this Stone will one day crush them. It is our grand duty to show Him to the world for what He is — our only hope and salvation. I’m reminded of a happening in Michelangelo’s life. He was often unpaid or poorly paid for his services. He needed a block of marble for a statue of David. He heard that a monastery had one, but it was flawed. He got it for very little, but out of that flawed piece came a grand statue. He worked around the flaw. So out of the rejected Cornerstone, Jesus, was created His glorious church.

The church serves as the Savior's voice

Jesus doesn't speak directly to the world today. He does so through His Word and through His people. Ephesians 3:10-11 says that through the church the wisdom of God is to be made known to rulers (and to all people). We are His spokespersons, to make known His will to others. The early church understood this. In Acts 8:4 we read that those scattered by persecution went everywhere preaching the Word. Those were not the apostles, for they remained in Jerusalem. They were everyday disciples with a message on their hearts. In this way the Kingdom spread steadily.

Today this is seldom the case, except in countries hungering for a better life and Christians young in the faith eager to show others this better life. Here in the U.S. the church generally only grows slightly. We must get over our timidity and begin sharing our faith with others, as did the early Christians. In Acts 19:10 we find that from Ephesus the Gospel reached out to all of the province of Asia. Paul wasn't doing all that traveling. He was in Ephesus teaching. Those converted took this teaching out to every corner of Asia.

The church serves as the Lord's benevolent hands

We receive calls and mail appeals regularly from benevolent organizations, some by our brothers in the faith and some by other groups. We help as we can. However, the principle benevolence organization in Christ's plan is the church. According to James 1:27, we are to care for the widows and orphans about us. We are to care for those in need, and especially those in the church. The Jerusalem church shared its material goods with those who lacked them (Acts 4:32-36). Paul collected gifts from the Gentile churches for the poor in Judea (Acts 24:17).

This is the New Testament pattern for helping those less fortunate than we. It is simple and direct, and calls for a compassionate and sacrificing heart on the part of all of us. It is to be done quietly, with no fanfare (Matthew 6:1-4).

So where is our true shelter?

The church is unique and inseparably connected with our great Cornerstone, Christ. We are His Bride, family, household, building, spokespersons and benevolent arms. Nothing can be nobler or more vital than these relationships to Christ. Let us always hold up the church as His glorious Bride and Body, serving diligently and lovingly in it, as Christ's shelter in the time of storms.

Chapter 15

The Mission of the Church

**(Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16, Luke 23:45-47,
Acts 8:4, Colossians 1:23)**

Introduction

When we talk about the mission of the church, several ideas come to mind. Some believe that the mission of the church is missions to other countries. Some believe that it is a mission to the inner city, to the poor, to prisons, to the church's local community, to the members, or to other locations and/or groups.

Actually, the church has more than one mission. These may all be valid and may be put into practice. None by itself is The Mission of the church. When that attitude toward missions is emphasized above all else, the work of the church can become distorted. For example, a church that concentrates its energies on foreign evangelism does well, but may be neglecting other aspects of its mission. Or, when it emphasizes outreach to the poor, that is good, but benevolence is not the only mission it has. If local evangelism is its mission, that too is good, but its mission should be far more extensive than that.

There must be balance in all that we do as a church. Let us look now at that balance:

The “Great Commission” mandate for the church

Jesus left marching orders for every generation of the church. He commanded His disciples to “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:16). He instructed us, “Go and make disciples of all nations ... ” (Matthew 28:18-20). Repentance and remission of sins are to be preached to all nations (Luke 24:47). Jesus' disciples are to be witnesses to His message to the ends of the earth.

We are not only to make disciples through baptism, but also to teach them

afterward to observe all that Christ and His apostles taught. One great weakness, apart from their strengths, of campaign groups is that there may be little follow-up afterward with new converts. This same weakness can be seen in local churches, which often do not ground new converts adequately in the faith. We just assume that they will absorb the elements of doctrine in Bible classes or their own study. However, it is a rare convert who grows alone, without being nourished by fellow Christians.

That the early Christians took these marching orders seriously is seen in several passages:

The apostles had been ordered not to keep preaching Jesus, but did so anyway, filling Jerusalem with their teaching (Acts 5:28). Their reason for doing so is found in Acts 4:20 — “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” And in Acts 5:29 — “We must obey God rather than man.”

Those who were scattered by persecution “preached the Word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4).

Paul reported that all Asia (the Roman province of Asia) had heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:10). He also declared that the Gospel had been proclaimed to every creature under heaven (Colossians 1:23). This may have been an all-inclusive statement meaning all of the known world or Roman world, because there is no indication historically that the Gospel had reached at that time the New World or tribes in Africa or Asia, despite statements to the contrary by the Latter Day Saints.

Every generation of Christians has a responsibility to share the Gospel with every creature of its generation. That is a huge order which we are only fulfilling in a small way. For instance, in Muslim lands only a tiny voice is heard for Christ. In China, Christian teaching is going on, but compared to the more than one billion people there (20.8 % of the world’s total), our efforts are very humble. Other such statistics could be noted, as well. We are doing a lot of teaching out in the world, but little compared to the multitude of people still not reached.

The local mandate to teach, baptize and nourish in the faith

A sign over the exit doors of the Clairemont church in San Diego, California, reads, “The mission field begins here.” That is true, but actually, the mission field begins right in the church pews and classrooms, if not in the homes of members. In a congregation of 1,200 members, such as the Edmond Church of Christ, there are many non-member husbands

or wives. There are young people still not converted. There are also many regular visitors who may not be Christian. Adding to this are family and relatives of members who are not yet Christian.

In looking farther out into our community, all of us have friends and contacts who are not yet Christians — doctors and their staffs, nurses, pharmacists and their staffs, school administrators and teachers, store clerks, bankers, insurance agents, firemen and policemen, city government personnel, attorneys, tax people, shop owners, service organizations, clubs, repair people ... the list goes on and on. I know personally at least 40 people in these categories. Some of you, especially if you have children in school, or are in various civic organizations, know many more, perhaps in the hundreds.

We have no lack of contacts. Our difficulty is that we fail to do much follow-up on these. Outreach is important, but harvesting results from it is even more important. Our responsibility to the lost (or even to the fallen brother or sister) is not just corporate, but also individual. In the spirit of Ezekiel 3:16-21, if we see someone who is not in Christ and we know how to instruct that person on his or her need for salvation, but say nothing, he or she will die in sin and we will bear a part of the blame. If we see a fellow Christian in error and say nothing, again we will bear a part of the blame. This is clear in teaching and is repeated for good measure in Ezekiel 33:1-9.

Nourishing new converts in the faith is also important. Jesus said that if every effort to travel over land and sea to make one convert is misguided or fails to mature correctly those converted, they become “twice as much a son of hell ... ” (Matthew 23:15). He was talking about the scribes and Pharisees, teachers of the Law, but the principle can apply also to the church.

The Great Commission tells us to not only make disciples, but also to teach them to observe all of Christ’s commandments. This can be done in special classes, private sessions or other means, but it must be done. One good way is to mentor the new convert, adopting him or her spiritually, as Paul did with Timothy and Titus. When I was preaching in Dallas, I mentored a youth named Stanley Bratcher, who led singing in our congregation. One week I asked him to preach in my place and I would lead singing. Neither of us did very well, but that launched him into his future path. For many years he has been preaching, currently in Searcy, Arkansas. In Kerman, California, I baptized a young man, Mitchell Potter. I just received a letter

from him in which he claimed that, apart from his parents, I had had the greatest influence on his life. I never realized it.

Our mission to those in need

We have a mission to care for the needs of others, and especially our fellow members and our own families. Paul tells us, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). James says that pure religion is to “look after orphans and widows in their distress ... ” (James 1:27).

Our mission to those in need includes, then, orphans and widows, but also any others in legitimate need (1 Timothy 5:8). This involves reaching out to both Christians and non-Christians in other countries who are victims of drought, disease, natural calamities and wars. We may assume that this is the responsibility of the government or of agencies such as the Red Cross, but it is primarily the responsibility of the church, and especially to our fellow Christians overseas. We have a good example of this in 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, and 2 Thessalonians 3:10, dealing with contributions from the Gentile churches to famine victims in Israel.

Finally, Jesus tells us that our condition before God is in part measured by our helping the hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, or sick and imprisoned (Matthew 25:34-36).

Our special obligation to family and fellow Christians

We have a unique responsibility to care for our own families, and to our fellow Christians — those of the household of faith. James also says, “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:15-16). See also 1 Timothy 5:8 on the matter of caring for the needs of our own family. Aged parents, family members who are in a health crisis, who have lost their jobs or who have suffered some disaster are first, the responsibility of their own family, before their need is taken to the church.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12, Paul admonishes Christians to work and not be dependent on others. This principle is true, but only applies to those who are not physically handicapped or ill to the point of not being able to hold a job.

So where is our true shelter?

We have seen in this chapter something of the worldwide and local scope of our mission as the church. We are to proclaim the Gospel to every person of our generation. We are to nourish in the faith new converts. We are especially to win our family, acquaintances and others of our community. And we are to care for the needs of all people, and especially those in the church and in our own families.

We understand, therefore, that our mission is both evangelistic and benevolent. Neither can stand by itself, because both are essential.

Chapter 16

Worship in the Church

(Malachi 1:6-14; John 4:24; Acts 2:42, 20:7;

1 Corinthians 14:26-40; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16)

Introduction

Holding to traditional worship is politically incorrect these days. Much diversity exists in worship style, with more diversity appearing continually. The religious world seems to demand innovation, in a reaction against traditional forms. However, in some religious circles, leaders have become tired of the “pep rally” kind of worship and the shallow music posing as hymns of worship. They are calling for sound doctrine and worship, to appeal first and foremost to God, and not to cater to the changing tastes of their members and contacts. But, as they become disenchanted with the status quo in contemporary worship, where can they turn to find a better model to follow?

Liturgical worship

The early church, as we shall see, was rather spontaneous, yet controlled, in public worship. This spontaneity gave way eventually to a highly controlled liturgy, as in the Catholic Church and many subsequent groups. The Roman and Eastern churches split in the 11th century in part over style of liturgy — Latin vs. Greek, Western vs. Eastern confessions of faith, instrumental music vs. a cappella ... along with two decidedly different cultural and political settings.

Anglican, Lutheran and other older Protestant groups followed somewhat the Catholic style of highly-structured liturgy, confessions of faith, choral rather than congregational singing, and instrumental music in worship. These churches generally have an annual liturgy format, with each Sunday’s worship prescribed in detail. The Orthodox churches also have a highly-organized liturgy, but without instrumental music. Mainline denominations, such as the Baptist churches, are more flexible in worship style, yet their worship is structured and predictable in style.

Free-wheeling worship

Evangelical and Charismatic churches often tend to be free-wheeling in worship. They invariably have a rock-style band composed of guitars, keyboard, percussion and other instruments. They feature solos, duets and choral groups, along with a number of repetitive choruses, many of which teach only a shallow message. There are few congregational songs, and these are sung from projections of the words only. Because of this, four-part harmony is sacrificed. Many in the congregation tend to listen to the “performers,” rather than singing with them.

Prayers are often prolonged, with members of the audience shouting out and raising their hands in praise. Few Bible passages are read and these often from the Psalms. Preaching may be boisterous and appealing to the emotions. Sermons may have little doctrinal content, featuring instead many anecdotes and illustrations. At the end of the long service there may be an “altar call,” with a number of people responding. They crowd near the pastor, groaning and weeping. This may go on for some time and then, with no closing prayer, people just begin to drift out.

Communion may be observed only monthly or even less frequently. In some cases the congregation files to the front, each person taking both the bread and the wine simultaneously, with no prayer of blessing. The service may include extensive appeals for money. In some cases there is tongue-speaking, a “healing” period and other spontaneous emotional outbursts.

Routine and repetitive worship

The opposite extreme is a worship so invariably routine and repetitive that every part of it can be predicted in advance, even without a formal printed program. Such a worship may be sincere, but still be lacking in spirit and deep devotion; a routine that offers little challenge for living a life closer to the Lord; a routine that requires little self-examination or emotional response. We in most churches of Christ have fallen into a worship style inherited more from our parents than from the New Testament. Before you disfellowship me, let me explain. The spontaneity of worship in the New Testament has been essentially lost (1 Corinthians 14:26-40). In that passage Paul showed that various people could, in turn, prophesy (in the sense of exhort) in the same service. However, he added restraints: “God is not a God of disorder, but of peace,” and “Everything should be done in a fitting (or decent) and orderly way.” In other words, we must have room for decent and orderly spontaneity in our public worship. However, there

is almost no opportunity for spontaneous exhortation, even by an elder, in a rigidly-formatted service.

Due to this locked-in mentality of sameness in worship, younger preachers of urban churches have clamored for change, to make worship more appealing to visitors and to precipitate numerical growth. They have added praise teams, much like the choral groups found in other churches. Then they have added instrumental music, for much the same reason. Their music has come to sound just like any secular band, with the same beat and instruments. What they fail to see is that many Protestant churches before them have done the same thing, but have seen their numbers declining. (Witness the Disciples of Christ, for instance.)

As many of us turn to innovations in worship, some denominations are returning to simple New Testament patterns. A leading Baptist minister, John Price, has excluded instruments from his church's worship and has written a book, **Old Light on New Worship**, in which he calls churches to reconsider what they are doing in worship, especially in the area of their music. At the 2008 Annual Southern Baptist Convention, member churches were urged to turn to a cappella (vocal) music on Sunday nights. A cappella is becoming a new rage. Some 1,200 a cappella singing groups now exist on college and university campuses, some of them secular in their selection of music and some spiritual. People are beginning to appreciate the discipline and quality of good vocal music.

But now, what does the Bible say about worship acceptable to God?

Old Testament teaching on worship

While we are no longer under Old Testament laws, there is good instruction in the Old Testament about attitudes regarding worship. For example, when Nadab and Abihu, sons of High Priest Aaron, used unconsecrated fire in their censers, the Lord struck them dead. Then He explained, "Among those who approach me I will show my self holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored" (Leviticus 10:1-3).

The Psalms were the praise, lament, petition and pilgrimage hymns of the Jewish people and were chanted, often with a leader chanting a line and the congregation responding with the next line (Psalm 136, for example). This is a style still used by Jews today and by churches in Africa.

Public worship also included readings from the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), the Poetry, Prophecy and other writings. Prayers were spoken. Sermons or exhortations were given.

Worship was always to be reverent, penitent and sincere in heart and spirit. In Psalm 100 the psalmist says that worshipers were to “shout for joy to the Lord, worship the Lord with gladness, come before Him with joyful songs, enter His gates with thanksgiving, and give thanks to Him and praise His name.” This is an excellent formula for worship in any age. Psalm 105 says to “give thanks to the Lord, sing praise to Him, tell of His wonderful acts, glory in His holy name and rejoice.” Psalm 122 tells us, “I rejoiced with those who said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord.’” Psalm 147 tells us, “how good it is to sing praises unto our God.” And Psalm 149 urges the Lord’s people to “sing His praise in the assembly of the saints.” In another vein, Psalm 51 calls upon God for mercy and compassion.

Malachi 1:6-14 warns against a lack of respect for God in worship. It warns against inferior sacrifices offered to the Lord and lighting useless fires on the altar. Why? The priests were being dishonest and disrespectful toward the Lord and the sacrifices due Him. They complained about the burden of sacrificing to God, rather than rejoicing in it. Judah flooded the altar with tears, but the Lord would not accept the worship offered to Him because of their sinful attitude and behavior.

Worship in the New Testament

Throughout the teachings of Jesus and the apostles the idea of the attitude we have behind our worship and service is all-important, much more so than the acts of worship and service in themselves.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:23-24 that if we have something against our brother (or he against us), we are to be reconciled before we can offer acceptable gifts to God (of worship, money, goods, talents, etc.). True worship must flow out of hearts that hold no grudges or animosities, but out of a forgiving and reconciling spirit (Matthew 6:14-15). Paul scolds the Corinthian church for its divisive spirit (1 Corinthians 11:19). Its worship was not acceptable to God; its partaking of the Lord’s supper was a shambles.

We are not to parade our worship, prayers, fasting or giving before others, to receive their plaudits, but rather, to do these acts quietly and for God’s glory (Matthew 6:1-8, 16-18).

Our worship is to be both in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). We can fulfill every detail of New Testament worship, but if there is no spirit to our worship, it is in vain. On the other hand, if we go into ecstasies of rapture in worship, but do not follow the New Testament requirements for worship,

again it is in vain. We have generally emphasized truth at the expense of spirit. Both must exist in our worship. Paul tells us that we must pray with our spirit, but also with our mind or understanding; we must sing with our spirit, but also with our mind and understanding.

Our singing is done with the most glorious instrument in existence — our voices, created by God Himself. We are to speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, three distinct kinds of worship music (Ephesians 5:19). Our worship is for the benefit and encouragement of each other, as well as for praise to the Lord. We are to teach and admonish each other with wisdom, as we sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Colossians 3:16). We are to give to the Lord a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of our lips that confess His name (Hebrews 13:15). Did you notice that? We praise the Lord with our lips, which excludes all mechanical or electronic instruments. Our lips are the only instrument mentioned in the New Testament for praising God. Music in the early church was always a cappella (voices singing together), instruments being associated with pagan worship. Instruments came into official use in churches only in the 11th century, introduced by the Roman Catholic Church. The eastern division of the church, the Orthodox Faith, did not use instruments and still does not.

In Sunday worship we also celebrate the Lord's Supper, instituted by Him just before His death as a new kind of Passover (Matthew 26:26-28, Luke 22:7-13).

This feast celebrates His death for our sins, as God's final Passover Lamb, celebrated on each Lord's Day (Acts 2:42, 20:7). It is a time of reflection, of discerning not just His body on the cross, but the body of His Christian family, and of self-examination (1 Corinthians 11:27-28). It should be the high point of the worship, with time spent in spiritual preparation for it and well-planned explanations and exhortations accompanying it. Woe be to us if we ever make the Lord's Supper routine or "mechanical" in format?

Our worship includes prayer, but not prayer that is repetitious or vain (Matthew 6:7). Rather, it is to be a reverent, penitent, heartfelt and sincere approach to God's throne (Hebrews 4:16). Those leading it must be able to pray clearly and loudly enough to be heard.

Our worship includes proclamation of the Word. In Troas on the Lord's Day, Paul preached until midnight, stopped to raise a young man from the dead, and then continued until daylight. I don't recommend this for today,

but do recommend that sermons be as well-prepared and as forceful as possible, even persuasive. Timothy was told to point out to the brothers sound doctrine, to command and teach it (1 Timothy 4:6, 11). He was to be zealous in the public reading of the Word, to preaching and teaching. He was to be diligent in his life and doctrine; to be a good example of Christian dedication (1 Timothy 4:15-16). Not every worship hour must have a sermon, however. We have no New Testament indication that one person only preached every Sunday to the same congregation.

Although there is no New Testament proof that a contribution was taken during the worship period, we know that Christians did set apart money on the first day of the week, according to their financial ability, for the Lord's cause (1 Corinthians 16:1-3). We collect that money during the worship as a convenience, not a command. However it is done, contributing to the Lord's work is required of all Christians, according to our means. Our giving must be liberal and sacrificial, not begrudging (2 Corinthians 8:1-5, 9:6-15).

No, there is no mention in Scripture about announcements. Again, it is a convenience for better communication and functioning of the local body. A brother in one region of Africa visited another region. Returning home, he informed his home church that it was leaving out an important part of the worship — announcements!

So where is our true shelter?

We in churches of Christ have prided ourselves on restoring the New Testament church. We have done a good job on some aspects of restoration, but have been weak on others. For instance, our worship still does not approach the best of worship in the first century — spontaneity, devoutness, spirit-filled praise and exhortation.

We believe that we can improve greatly our worship without adding innovations that are aimed at pleasing people. We believe the New Testament church can function today in the spirit and doctrine of the church in the Apostolic Age. Sound and spiritual worship is an integral part of that functioning.

Chapter 17

The Church, a Nourishing Family

(Romans 8:14-16, 2 Corinthians 6:17-18, 1 Thessalonians 4:9)

Introduction

The Apostle Paul instructed his protégé, Timothy, concerning the church and God's intention for it. Jesus had taught many important things, but had said little about His church, at least little that was recorded (Matthew 16:18 being the only clear statement about the church, which was to be built upon confession of Christ as Lord and Savior). He left it to his Spirit-inspired apostles to grow the church and instruct it about its worship, work and organization. So Paul said to Timothy, "... if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

Did we all notice the analogy Paul used to describe the church? He said that the "church of the living God" is the "household of God." A household is "all of the persons forming one family." The Bible often uses this word to describe a family, as in the case of Cornelius, who feared God with all of his household (Acts 10:2), and Noah, who prepared an ark for the salvation of his household (Hebrews 11:7).

God as our Father, we as His children

The analogy of "family" emphasizes the relationship that should occur in the church. First, there is a "father/child relationship between God and His people. Paul tells us, "those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ... but you received the Spirit of sonship ... the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:14-16). The Apostle John adds to this figure in these words: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1). It is because of God's great love for us that He invites us into His "home," to become members of His family. When we adopted our

daughter at nine weeks of age, she became legally a member of our family and has all of the rights, privileges and responsibilities of familyhood. God desires this kind of relationship with all of us and pleads with all of us to enter this relationship — “come out from them and be separate, says the Lord ... I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters” (2 Corinthians 6:17-18).

This analogy is greatly weakened by the diminished role and weak reputation of fathers in our society. They are ridiculed and scorned, so the biblical concept of fatherhood is lost in various ways and definitely needs to be restored. Only with a restored model of fatherhood as God intends it, can we fully appreciate His relationship to us as our Father.

Jesus as elder brother in this divine family

The writer of Hebrews presents Jesus as our elder brother (Hebrews 3:9). If He is our Brother, as well as Savior, Mediator and Redeemer, then we in the church are all His siblings. Perhaps a misplaced understanding of “sibling” may be the cause of much of our sibling rivalries in the church. Jacob and Esau are prime examples of this rivalry, as are Joseph and his brothers. Unfortunately, we have some Jacobs and Esaus still around in our church family. Jesus is the father’s primary heir, as His only-begotten, but He extends family blessings to all of us. Can you imagine the benefits of being a part of a great worldwide family of believers? We can have a talk with our Father at any time — “chat Him up” in today’s language (Matthew 6:6). We have Jesus always present to guide us home to the Father. We are heirs of the family estate, which Peter describes as “an imperishable and undefiled inheritance, reserved in Heaven for us” (1 Peter 1:3-4). And in the interval before Heaven, we have the loving fellowship of our brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:9).

God’s great expectations for His children

Great blessings are found in the family of God, but there are great expectations on His part for us. Families that have no rules for behavior generally create little monsters. We all understand the need for family discipline and responsibilities. It is a terrible mistake to think that God has placed no responsibilities on His children. When we enter His family, several family rules apply:

- God expects us to be separate from the world. Our Father is not pleased with worldly lust, conforming to the world’s standards, engaging in the world’s pursuits and having boastful pride. John said, “Do not love the

world or anything that is in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father, but from the world” (1 John 2:15-16). This is a tough rule, because we are surrounded constantly by the world’s pressures to conform.

- God expects His children to be obedient. Scripture says, “Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor does anyone who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10). And, “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness” (Ephesians 5:11). Do you remember what Samuel said to the disobedient King Saul? “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22).

- God expects His children to take care of one another. We are to do good “to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 5:10). In the pagan world no one normally cared a snap for others outside of their own family, and sometimes even in their own family. But among Christians a far different spirit prevailed. For instance, new Jewish converts cared for their fellow converts (Acts 2:44-45). The Gentile churches came to the aid of their Jewish brothers and sisters (2 Corinthians 8:1-7). Roman officials were amazed. One commented, “Look how they love one another.” A spirit of sharing and goodwill must permeate God’s family.

- God expects His children to be present for family gatherings — worship, fellowship, service, times of distress and times of celebration. Hebrews 10:25 admonishes us that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together, but rather, encourage each other to participate. Because of this concept of the church as family, there can be no “Lone Ranger” Christians in God’s household.

- God expects us to wear the family name with pride. It had been prophesied long before that the people of God would be given a new name (Isaiah 62:2, 65:15). Fulfilling this prophecy, it was in a Gentile church that the disciples of Christ were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Peter had explained to Jewish authorities that “there is no other name under heaven ... by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Here is a name that unites the church. This is the name that distinguishes the family of God. There must never be another — an inferior name — which replaces the name of Christ or that drops His name. Yet we see all around us church names of every description.

So where is our true shelter?

The kingdom analogy emphasizes the form of governmental authority among God's people, and the church analogy emphasizes the sanctification that should prevail among Christians. Now, the family analogy emphasizes the type of relationship that should exist among the people of God. It is a body that honors and obeys its Father, follows the leadership of its elder brother, shepherd, savior, redeemer and mediator, Jesus, and treats all other Christians with love and a caring spirit.

The church is of supreme importance in all of these analogies. We dare not attempt to tamper with its Head, its structure, its sanctification, its purposes or its familyhood. It is to be a place of shelter and healing — never of discord.

Chapter 18

The Church, a Farming Community

(Matthew 13:3-8, 21:43; John 15:8; 2 Timothy 2:2)

Introduction

The New Testament uses various analogies, one of which is an agricultural theme. Jesus and the apostles could look around them and see many examples of farming at work, drawing illustrations from them. For instance, Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard” (Matthew 20:1). I can easily identify with this theme, having lived for several years in the Fresno, California, area, where countless Thompson Seedless grapes were grown and where workers were recruited for the harvest. This farm analogy of Jesus shows the church as a place where work is done. Believe me, harvesting grapes and other crops is work!

In Matthew 13:3-8, Jesus takes us back to the farm again, this time to introduce a farmer scattering or “broadcasting” seed in his field. The seed represents the Word of God (Luke 8:11) and the field represents the hearts of people (Matthew 13:19). This parable of Jesus demonstrates how the kingdom of God spreads — through the teaching and preaching of God’s Word. Paul told Timothy that what he had heard from the apostle he was to entrust to faithful men, who would be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2). This instruction reflects the labor of God’s people as we spread His Word and nurture others, so that they, in turn, may spread His Word.

What our true purpose is

Most important of all, the farm analogy teaches Christians what God intends our purpose in life to be. In John 15:8, Jesus said, “By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.” Here the agricultural analogy turns to the topic of “fruit.” Several years ago we planted an apricot tree. It produced nothing until it was more mature. Then it produced a little, then more and finally, such a crop that

we were giving away apricots right and left. In this way it was fulfilling its purpose. But then it became diseased and died, we thought, so we cut it down. This year, however, new life is growing out of the stump. Who could have imagined it?

The Christian's purpose in life is to bear fruit. What does that mean? In the New Testament, there are three ways in which fruit is defined as it applies to the life of a Christian:

- It is defined as proper attitudes of the heart. In Luke 3:8-11, John the Baptist was asked what he meant by “bringing forth fruit in keeping with repentance.” He replied that his listeners would have to denounce superficial religion and practice humility, generosity, honesty, kindness and moderation. Paul listed nine qualities which he called “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-23. These are (agape) love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Surely, we are bearing good fruit if all of these virtues exist in us.

- Bearing fruit is defined as doing good deeds. In Colossians 1:10, Paul encouraged Christians to be “bearing fruit in every good work.” In Romans 15:28, he referred to the contributions of Christians to help the poor as “this fruit of theirs.” He commended the church in Philippi for supporting him monetarily as he preached in other areas. He said, “Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account (Philippians 4:17). The ASV calls this gift “fruit.” We are therefore bearing much fruit when we do good deeds.

- Likewise, “bearing fruit” is applied to gathering souls into the kingdom of God. One day Jesus commented about the masses of people coming to hear Him preach. He said to His disciples, “I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest” (John 4:35). The context here was the Samaritans, who were considered by Jews to be unworthy of their attention. Bringing others to Christ, doing good deeds and showing proper attitudes — in all of this we find our true purpose as Christians.

Fruit-bearing essential

God considers the bearing of fruit to be very important. Ancient Israel had been called the Lord's vineyard. He had done everything possible to help His people be productive, but they refused. In Isaiah 5:1-7, God lamented all of the effort He had put forth on their behalf and their total lack of fruitbearing. Therefore, He promised to destroy them. Centuries later, Jesus reminded the Jews of their continued lack of spiritual productivity

in a parable about unworthy tenants who even killed the landowner's son (referring to Himself), in order to take by force his vineyard. Jesus concluded with this startling announcement: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matthew 21:43). He also described a son who promised his father that he would work in the vineyard, but never did. Then Jesus said that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom ahead of those ungrateful and obstinate Jews (Matthew 21:31). This must have been galling to them, for they considered tax agents and harlots at about the same trashy level as the Samaritans.

Not long later the kingdom of God was taken from them and given to another people — Gentiles who would open their hearts and turn to Him. Paul told hard-hearted Jewish leaders in Rome that "God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen" (Acts 28:28). Paul told Gentile Christians in Corinth that they were "God's field" (1 Corinthians 3:9).

So where is our true shelter?

The U.S. Marines are always looking for the few good men (and women) who measure up to their high standards. In the church, we are looking for all to be like dedicated Marines. In most congregations, however, there are a number who are hangers-on, not really producing anything. We elders agonize over them, because they just don't or can't seem to see what the church is all about.

The people who truly belong to God and His church will be found working to spread the Kingdom, to bear much fruit in love and kindness, and to demonstrate in their lives all of the fruit of the Spirit. Not everyone has a gift for evangelism, but all of us can befriend and help those about us. We can show them in our lives what genuine Christianity is all about. An old proverb says, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day." Remember that unproductive fruit trees or vines are cut down and burned. We live to be good examples and to produce good works and good results in soul-harvesting, bringing others into the shelter that we so much enjoy.

Chapter 19

The Church a Gifted Priesthood

(Hebrews 10:8-12, 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 1:6)

Introduction

The principle of priesthood has many ramifications, and even abuses, in the religious world. Ancient religions had priests, who were the only ones qualified to approach the “gods.” They were a special class, set apart by dress and training, for the mysterious functions of religious worship and service, and were found in Egyptian, Chaldean, Canaanite and other religious systems. Later on, the idea of a special class of priests or “holy ones” crept into the church, with its priests, monks and “saints.” The same idea exists in Islam, in which only a mullah or ayatollah is qualified to read the Qur’an and expound on it.

The Israelites were given detailed instructions in Exodus and Leviticus, especially, about who were to be priests, their dress and service. Priests were to come only from the family of Aaron, Moses’ brother, of the tribe of Levi (Exodus 28:1). Aaron was to be the high priest, wearing special garments and leading in the worship of the Israelites. Only he could enter the Most Holy Place, to offer propitiation for his sins and those of the people (Exodus 28, Leviticus 16).

His four sons were to serve under him, to care for the general sacrifices, the lamp stand, the altar of incense, the holy bread and other details of worship, service and sacrifice to God. Disobedience of the strict commands given to the priests resulted in the immediate death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s two eldest sons (Leviticus 10:1-11).

The new Christian system of priesthood

The priesthood continued until the time of Jesus, when there was a radical change. In His death, Jesus became our perfect and final sacrificial Lamb, whose blood washes away our sins (Hebrews 10:8-12; 1 John 1:7, 2:2).

He also became our permanent high priest, not according to the Mosaic System, nor born into the family of Aaron, but according to an earlier and more eternal system, that of Melchisedek. In Hebrews 4:14-5:6 and 7:1-28 the priesthood of Melchisedek is explained and its fulfillment in Christ is established. Jesus became a priest forever, in the order of Melchisedek (Hebrews 7:17). This strange name means “King of Righteousness.” He was king and priest of Salem (the future Jerusalem), which means “peace.” Jesus, his divine counterpart, is therefore priest and king of righteousness and peace.

With a change of priesthood there was of necessity a change of covenant. In Hebrews 8 this is spelled out. Quoting from Jeremiah 31:31-34, the writer of Hebrews declared that the Mosaic Covenant had been made obsolete, being replaced by the New Covenant sealed by Christ in His blood (Hebrews 8:13). In Christ we have a perfect high priest who understands us, has sympathy for us and gives us all we need for this life and eternity (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Since the high priesthood changed, there was of necessity a change also in the priesthood. It was no longer to be Mosaic, but Christian. Revelation 1:6, 5:10 and 20:6 say that we have been made a kingdom and priests to serve God. As children of God, we function under Christ our High Priest as His associate priests, responsible for our personal purity, dedication and sacrifice, all of which we will consider later in this chapter.

Elementary changes made in the priesthood after New Testament times

Not long after the church began, the New Testament system of priesthood began to change. The developing structure of the church slowly reverted to the Mosaic priesthood system. In the west, the Pope came to be the high priest, with a hierarchy of cardinals, archbishops, bishops and local priests serving officially under him. The masses could not approach the altar or even God directly, but had to go through the priest. Even today, the priest still acts as a mediator, baptizing, sanctifying the altar, placing the wafer on the tongue of the recipient, absolving sins and officiating at all official sacraments of the church.

This system was followed in the Eastern Orthodox faith, but minus the Pope. It carried over into the Anglican, Lutheran and other early protestant faiths, and is still seen in the position of the local pastor, who is the only person authorized to administer baptism, the Lord’s Supper (eucharist)

and other “sacraments.” Gone are the days of individual priesthood, in which any faithful Christian could approach God directly through Christ and could direct aspects of worship and service. The pastor in most religious groups still has much authority, heading up the local church and administering the official worship of the church.

In churches of Christ, we still have vestiges of this system, in that the preacher or preachers are expected to do the public preaching, baptize, conduct weddings and funerals, and care for other such functions. The average member sees himself or herself as non-official or non-professional — more an audience than a priest.

Returning to the concept of universal priesthood

If we are to really be the New Testament church, we must return to the biblical principle of universal priesthood. By this I mean that every member is responsible for sacrifice, worship, service and example. Let us look more closely at these aspects of our priesthood:

- **Sacrifice.** Every member must deny self, take up his or her cross daily and follow Jesus (Matthew 16:24). We must have the attitude of Jesus — “Not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39). What a difference it would make if we practiced seeking daily the will of Christ, rather than our own will. Taking up our cross means to take on the difficult tasks and missions. Taking up our cross means to carry a burden for others, as well as for Jesus. It means seeking the good of the church and of others above our own good. It means foregoing our own wishes and comfort for His cause. It means following Jesus wherever He leads us. It means keeping His light burning, His incense (of prayer) spreading, and offering our bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord (Romans 12:1). We are living sacrifices, placing our lives daily on the altar. Wendell Broom, a great missionary servant, once observed, “The trouble with our living sacrifice is that, about the time we get it on the altar, it begins to slip off.”

- **Worship.** Just as the priests were responsible for the worship of the Jewish people, so we, as Christian priests, are responsible for worship. We are present when worship is being conducted. We are ardent participants in worship. We are careful that our worship is in spirit and truth (John 4:24). If our worship is merely a mechanical compliance to the Lord’s orders, then it is not in spirit. If it is in spirit, but ignores Bible teaching on worship, then it is not in truth. Both are absolutely essential. Remember that Nadab and Abihu, in Leviticus 10, offered unsanctified (unauthorized)

fire to the Lord and were immediately killed. Surely they thought, “After all, fire is fire. What’s the difference? Besides, this isn’t a salvation issue.” Ah, but it was and they paid dearly for their assumption. As priests, they were required to meet all of the standards laid down by the Lord. We, as Christ’s priests today, are under the same obligation. Our worship must be sincere, dedicated, and practiced in spirit and in truth.

- **Service.** The priests had a daily duty of offering sacrifices, keeping the holy candelabra burning, maintaining the daily burning of incense, providing the holy bread and taking care of the tabernacle (and later, the temple). Their service was demanding. They had a daily routine to follow. So we have daily service to perform for our Lord — sacrificing, keeping the light of the world burning brightly, lifting up daily incense of prayer, sharing the Bread of Life with others and caring for God’s temple, which is His body, the church, and we as individual members of that body (1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19-20). We are not drunken. We do not use drugs. We do not grow obese from an improper diet and lack of exercise. (Did I just say that?) We do not do anything, if we can avoid it, to harm God’s temple.
- **Instruction.** The ancient priests were to instruct the people on obedience, worship, sacrifice, ritual cleanliness, personal purity and hygiene, and other such matters. We priests today have a like responsibility. We are to teach others the way of salvation and afterward, how to live the Christian life. This is not the task of a professional clergy or only of experienced teachers, but rather, the task of all, to do to the best of our ability.
- **Example.** Priests were to set an example of devotion and dedication for the rest of the people. They were to be ritually pure, in order to care for the functions of their ministry. We as priests of God today have the same mandate — to be pure in heart and mind, to be devout, to dedicate our lives to the Lord and to set an example of how believers should be and act (John 13:15, 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Peter 2:21, James 5:10). We have a wonderful example in Jesus and faithful men and women. We are to walk in His steps and reflect Him in our life.

So where is our true shelter?

Living as priests of God is no easy task. Priests are dedicated to God’s service in every aspect of life. We are to be living sacrifices, dedicated to worship, service, teaching and example before others. Remember, what we are speaks much louder than what we say. The only special class of priests in the New Testament is that of all Christians.

Each of us has his or her own gifts and abilities, but the above basic requirements fall on each of us. A cartoon shows some elders interviewing a member. One elder says, “We have taken a close look at your gifts and believe you are best suited to filling a pew.” Not so in God’s plan for the church! If all we do is fill a pew, we haven’t yet caught the vision of what it means to be a priest of God and His Son (Revelation 1:6). May all of us truly be priests of God, offering the daily sacrifice of our lives to Him and shining as lights in the darkness about us (Ephesians 5:8-9). Our true shelter is found only in Christ, our High Priest, and His priesthood of believers.

Part 3

The Christian Life — Growing toward Maturity

Chapter 20

The Christian Life — a Work in Progress

(Matthew 5:1-12, Luke 6:20-23)

Introduction

My life has been spent in striving for perfection, but I have never quite arrived, so I'm still truly "a work in progress." In my athletic days I tried to arrive at perfection, occasionally showing a spark of ability in basketball. Track and distance running became my forte, where at times I shined. However, I never fully succeeded at becoming the very best. In my fields of art, writing and hymn creation, the same is true — almost great but not quite. And in my Christian walk, the same is also true. I aim for perfection, but always fall short. One consolation is that I am not alone in this struggle. Paul said, "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me" (Romans 7:21). So the struggle continues, with its peaks of progress and valleys of setbacks.

How about you? Do you consider yourself perfect in every sense? I worked with a man one time who declared that he had never sinned. I finally grew tired of that and told him, "You sinned right now." What did I mean by that? If we deny never having sinned, we lie: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8).

The Christian life is one of slow and often unsteady growth. We are to aim for a fully mature life in Christ (Ephesians 3:17-19), but this takes a lifetime. In the process of maturing in the faith, we are to develop, with His help, certain distinctive characteristics. These we will now examine:

Jesus' teaching on the Christian life

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is filled with requirements for living in Christ. Matthew records several times when Jesus taught or retired to mountains. The locale for Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was somewhere in hills surrounding the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was followed

by a large crowd. He climbed a hill or mount, sat down and taught His disciples. This was probably a larger group and not the 12, who are not mentioned separately until Chapter 10. Sitting was common for teachers in ancient times. This sermon contains the essence of Jesus' moral and spiritual teaching. If we did nothing more than study it carefully, we would profit greatly.

The nature of the Beatitudes

The beatitudes form the opening section of the sermon. Beatitude comes from the Latin word, "beatitudo," which is a translation of the Greek word, "makarios," generally translated "blessed." It is an interjection which more accurately means, "Oh, the happiness of ... !" or "How happy is ... !" There are other beatitudes throughout Scripture, but this one is a special list from the mouth of Jesus Himself.

Each beatitude has a condition laid down and the results of fulfilling that condition. There are eight of these conditions, with the ninth "blessed" an amplification of the eighth one. These are eight different facets of the character of those who walk with Jesus. The idea is completeness of character and blessings for the individual and not the idea that one Christian is a peacemaker, another is pure in heart, etc. These are inward characteristics which are not determined by outward events.

Blessings for the Christian Life

- Blessed are the poor in spirit (v. 3). This does not mean poverty. If it did, every poor person would automatically gain the Kingdom of Heaven. There is no blessing just for being poor, nor is there a curse just for being rich. Outward conditions do not have to be a curse on us. There were wealthy people in the Bible who were very faithful, generous and devoted to the Lord's cause. There were poor people who were blessed. There is no place in the Kingdom for the self-sufficient rich, nor is there place for the poor who blame others for their condition and try to work others. "Poor in spirit" means being humble and contrite, not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Romans 12:3); quick to ask forgiveness and start over.

- Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (v. 4). This can mean the mourning we experience when death or other tragedies strike, but it also means much more. It means mourning over the evil that exists in the world, over the lostness of humanity, over disobedience, over one's own faults, over fellow Christians who walk in an improper manner, over

divorce, abortion, sexual promiscuity, drinking, drugs, improper behavior by fellow Christians, crime, violence, misbehavior among government officials, hunger and disease in the world ... Those who mourn injustice and disobedience shall be comforted by the Lord (Isaiah 61:2-3). Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy (Psalm 126:5). This is what the beatitude promises.

- Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth (v. 5). Meekness does not mean weakness. It means those who are mastered by God and, through His presence and power, control their lives. Meekness is like a horse broken to the bridle. Meekness means strength from God, not arrogance and pushiness, which are characteristics the world considers strength. Meekness means humility and contriteness, rather than stubbornness and a desire to get even. True meekness brings a great reward — inheriting the earth, which probably means spiritual conquest or inheriting the “new heavens and new earth.”

- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled (v. 6). Physical hunger and thirsts are basic drives of all of us. Jesus uses these natural drives to illustrate the compelling hunger His followers should have for the Word and for a righteous life. (See Psalm 42:1-2). How far from this characteristic are we in our hectic life today?

- Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy (v.7). What does it mean to be merciful? When we criticize, gossip, condemn or hold back forgiveness and grace toward others, we are far from being merciful. As we act toward others, so will God act toward us. If we show no mercy, we will be shown no mercy.

That is a terrifying thought! Only the merciful will receive mercy and forgiveness from our Lord.

- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (v. 8). This means interior purity — of the heart — and not outward ceremonialism. It means purity of thought and behavior, even in the midst of all the moral filth all about us. The pure in heart are consistent in life and behavior, not like the Pharisees and Scribes who would not enter the Praetorium (the Roman garrison) in order not to be defiled, but screamed before its entrance for the death of an innocent man. The pure in heart are the only ones who will see God face to face. Nothing unclean can enter there.

- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (v. 9). This is a person who is just the opposite of a troublemaker, gossip, critic,

one who harshly judges others. Peacemakers actively seek peace among others and with others. In order to be successful at this and be called true sons of God, they must first make peace with Him. Then they can develop the characteristics of a true arbitrator of peace. The Christian is called to be peaceful (1 Corinthians 7:15). There can be no place for church squabbles, hurt feelings and other such behavior for true children of God. How I wish I could back way up and redo some squabbles in which I found myself! How different the outcome might have been if I had just tried harder to be a peacemaker!

- Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (v. 10-12). If we bring on our own suffering, that is no blessing, as Peter said in 1 Peter 3:8-17. It takes great faith and spiritual maturity to refuse to strike back or shrink away from real persecution. Jesus told us that if we stand up for the truth, we will suffer persecution, but He said to be of good cheer, for He has overcome the world (John 16:33). Too often we condemn our condemners, rather than forgiving them. We must be like Christ if we are to be in His kingdom.

So where is our true shelter?

If we want to really follow Jesus, we must work and pray continually to grow in all of these blessings. This is as basic as it gets — the very heart of Jesus' message. These beatitudes are a lifelong set of guidelines for us. I'm reminded here of Benjamin Franklin, a brilliant statesman and philosopher who decided that he could, by himself, conquer his weaknesses. He would list them and then, beginning January 1, overcome the first one. Then he would move on to the weakness assigned to February, and then to March. However, by the time he got to March, he looked back and discovered that he had slipped again into January's weakness.

We cannot expect to grow in Christian maturity without Jesus, without His Spirit, without prayer and without serious growth in Bible study and its applications. I move ahead a bit on one and slip a bit on another, so have a long way to grow yet. And you? Are you safely in our Lord's sheltering arms?

Chapter 21

On Being a Positive Influence

(Matthew 5:13-16, 13:33; Luke 13:20-21, 14:34-35)

Introduction

Light is essential to almost all living cells. Just hide a flower or plot of grass under a bucket and see what happens. Light is essential for photosynthesis. Also important to life is salt, unless its use is overdone. And helpful, if not essential, is leaven. Jesus used each of these common elements to teach important lessons about the nature of His followers. They were to be salt, light and leaven.

The nature of salt as it applies to Christians

Salt has several important functions.

- It flavors.
- It penetrates.
- It preserves or saves.
- It has cleansing and curative powers.

When Jesus said that His followers were to be the salt of the earth, He meant that we were to penetrate, flavor, save, cleanse and cure. In other words, we are to be a powerful spiritual and moral influence in the world. We are to penetrate society throughout the world and seek to preserve or save it. This is our nature as salt of the earth. We must do all we can by the Lord's help to bring cleansing and spiritual cure to the lost. This we sometimes fail to do. Jesus says that if we have lost our saltiness — our power to penetrate, flavor, save and cure through His power and Word — then we are useless to Him. Actually, we are worse than useless, because without our influencing and saving power, we destroy, just as contaminated salt destroys plants and grass.

The nature of spiritual light as it is reflected through us

Then He said that we are the light of the world. Light was very important to the people of ancient times. The only illumination they had at night, other than perhaps a fire, was an oil lamp, which was either hung down from the ceiling or placed on a stand. Light was to illuminate; to clarify, to expose sin. Jesus used the example of a city on a hill. They were built on hills for defense purposes and to avoid taking up valuable cultivating land. Therefore, they stood out; they could not be hidden. In Italy and many other countries today there are many ancient towns still perched on hilltops or ridges.

Our Lord's light is to shine, but we do not create it. We reflect it, just as a lighthouse reflects light and sends it out as a beam in the darkness. The great reflecting astronomical telescopes concentrate the light from distant galaxies, reflecting it back and forth between angular mirrors, until it is greatly magnified and concentrated. So our light, which we receive from Jesus, is to be concentrated in us and reflected back to the world. We are to reflect Christ in our lives in every regard. Then others will see that our good works are not of us, but of Him, and will glorify God because of us.

The nature of the Christian as leaven

We are to be Christ's leaven to the world. Bread without leaven is flat, dry and pretty tasteless. Matzos used in many churches in their Lord's Supper are a good example. Leaven must permeate the entire piece of dough. Remember bread-making at home when you were a child? There was a big metal pot filled with dough to which was added yeast. Then the dough would be set aside to rise. When it had reached the top of the pot, it was ready to bake. Leaven must penetrate whatever it touches. Jesus said that the Kingdom is like leaven, permeating the world silently and changing it. We don't do it by politics, strikes, demonstrations, massive media campaigns, but silently influencing the lives of others around us. Think of the importance of just one person dedicated to the Lord. A good example is Esther, from the book with her same name.

To illustrate further the value of one, when several years ago a plane hit a bridge in Washington, D.C., a stewardess was hanging on, barely, having gone under the water twice. A man passing by jumped out of his car and into the freezing water. He couldn't save everyone on the flight, but explained that he could save one, so he did. We can't save the world by ourselves, but we can bring people to Christ one by one. We don't do this

by being pushy, demanding or judgmental, but by gently penetrating their hearts and sowing the seed of the Gospel. We do this by example, which may be even more important than leavening words.

So where is our true shelter?

We must not only talk the talk as Christians, we must walk the walk. We must be active agents of Christ in the world; His ambassadors to the “foreign country” of the world (2 Corinthians 5:20). We must actively season, save, illuminate and penetrate the lives of others. There is no place for passive Christianity. Many seem to think so, because on any given week, close to 100 of the 1,200 members on our church roll are AWOL, some for months or years on end. In some cases they have a valid reason, such as illness or travel, but in most there doesn’t appear to be any just cause for their continued absence from worship, service, prayer, giving, influence and active penetrating of their society with God’s Word and with their example.

Let us renew our determination to salt, enlighten and penetrate the hearts of others. These great blessings we have in Christ are all designed to share, not to hoard.

Chapter 22

It's All About Attitude

(Matthew 5:17-48)

Introduction

In the Law of Moses the act was all-important. If someone committed murder by premeditation or because of hatred or anger, he or she was to be put to death (Exodus 20:13). The act of homosexuality or incest was worthy of death, as was adultery (Leviticus 18:6-18, 22). A woman who didn't measure up to her husband's expectations could be divorced by stating "I divorce you" three times and writing up a document to that effect (Deuteronomy 24:1). There was little emphasis on the attitude behind the act. Someone could wish another person dead, but if no action was taken, there was no guilt. Someone might lust, but if no action were taken, it was not considered of great import, at least as interpreted by the scribes and priests.

Jesus, however, cut right to the heart of the matter. He talked about the attitude behind the act. He presented with authority the shocking idea that from the heart come all evils. So, if we hate, wish ill toward others, lust, long for revenge or have other impure and hateful thoughts, we are just as guilty before God as if we had actually done the evil thing we thought. This was radical, indeed, to a people concerned more about fulfilling the outward details of the Law but gave no thought to the spirit behind those details.

Let's take a look at the new and deeper level of attitude that He emphasizes in the Sermon on the Mount:

Jesus and the Law

Contrary to accusations against Him, Jesus did not come to destroy the Law, but rather, to fulfill or complete it. Not one little vowel, breathing, pronunciation or stress mark in the Hebrew of the Law would disappear until He had completed the entire Law. What did He do to complete it? (See Hebrews 9:14, 10:4.)

“But I say unto you ...”

- If we hate, we have murdered (Matthew 5:21-26). Even if we are raving angry with another person, we are guilty. If we call another person stupid, idiot, a fool (or worse), we will be subject to God’s eternal judgment and hell itself. If we are on the way to Bible class or worship and remember that someone else is holding a grudge against us, what should we do? Should we go ahead to the services, or should we go back to that person and do all possible to be reconciled with him or her? This is to say nothing of our holding a grudge against another person (Mark 11:25). Jesus even tells us that we must settle matters quickly. What would this do in the realms of marital discord, or relational problems at work or at church? We have probably all held ill feelings against someone else perhaps for years. This kind of attitude problem cannot be brushed off with the excuse that it’s someone else’s fault or that we just can’t help it. Our very worship of God is impeded by a bad attitude toward others.

- If we lust after someone not our mate, we have already committed adultery in our hearts without even touching the object of our lust (vs. 27-30). Jesus uses extreme figurative language to illustrate His case: If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If your hand gets you into trouble, cut it off. He didn’t mean to do this literally, but to take whatever steps are necessary to overcome the source of the temptation and succumbing to it.

- If we divorce for any reason other than proven marital unfaithfulness, we have created an impossible situation (v. 31-32). We drive our ex-mate to a new and adulterous relationship and must therefore share the guilt. Anyone who marries such a divorcee commits adultery. Now if one mate has committed adultery, that destroys the marital bond or covenant and the innocent party may marry again without guilt. However, we need to look long and carefully at what really contributed to the adultery. Our attitude problem or behavior may have driven our mate into the arms of someone else. A totally innocent victim in a marital conflict is probably a rarity. How far we have gone from the principle laid down here by Jesus; we will pay for it. Again, Jesus has gone to the heart of the matter — to the attitudes behind infidelity and divorce.

- We are not to swear at all, in the sense of oath-taking (v. 33-37). Profanity is sinful, but is not dealt with here. Jesus is saying that we are to be so honest that there is no need for taking oaths to verify our word. The Jews of His day had many different levels of oath-taking and prohibitions involved in oaths. Our Lord cut through all of that and said simply, “Let

your yes be yes and your no be no.” There is no room here for fudging on the truth or making extravagant and embroidered claims. There is no room for precipitous pledges or even promises that we cannot keep. During our years in Brazil we eventually learned to accept promises with a grain of salt. For instance, someone would promise to study the Bible with us, so a time was set. It turned out that the prospective student had no intention of showing up, merely wanting to say what he or she thought we wanted to hear. That was always frustrating, but was deeply imbedded into their culture.

- We are not to fight back, get even or seek revenge (v. 38-42). It is not even acceptable to resist an evil person. This is extremely difficult to practice. Our human nature is to strike back, but Jesus says that if we are struck, turn the other cheek. If we are unjustly sued, settle the matter and give the person more than he demands. In a somewhat parallel case, when our granddaughter was badly burned due to negligence on the part of contractors and apartment complex owners, our son did not sue. He ended up getting a more than generous settlement because the responsible parties were grateful not to be dragged through a suit. We are to do more than is demanded of us. And perhaps the most difficult of all: Give to him who asks and don't turn away the borrower.

- We are to love our enemies and pray for them (v. 43-48). Otherwise, we cannot be God's sons and daughters. I remember hating Hitler and later on, Stalin, Khomeni, Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Ladin. Wrong! I should have been praying for them. It is fairly easy to love those who love us. Everyone, even the most pagan, can do that. We are to live above the standards of the world, striving for perfection in Christ. This is a tall order, indeed, but possible to accomplish or Jesus would not have required it.

So where is our true shelter?

One of the most common errors we Christians practice is that of inconsistency of behavior. We say one thing, but do another. We preach and teach it well, but don't always live up to it. We go through the motions of being good Christians, but our attitudes are far inferior. We say, “Lord, Lord,” but don't do the will of our Father. To Jesus, attitude is everything. Therefore, we must consistently both talk the talk and walk the walk.

Chapter 23

If You Do It for Display ...

(Matthew 6:1-18)

Introduction

In keeping with their attitude, religious leaders of Jesus' day "proved" their holiness by parading it publicly. As Jesus emphasized in Matthew 23, they stood on a street corner and prayed loudly, so that others could see how saintly they were. When they fasted, they charcoaled their faces, to appear gaunt, and wore drab clothing. When they gave, they made sure that the sound of their coins dropping in the treasury could be heard and applauded. All that they did in the name of religion was for show.

I attended a special conference once in Brazil. The main speaker was a man who made the Sermon on the Mount come alive. On many points from it he said, "Well, when you sing hoping that others will be impressed by your voice, when you pray with flowery words hoping that others will be impressed by your poetic phrases, when you preach hoping for many words of congratulations afterwards, when you give ostentatiously hoping that others will think you are especially generous, when you pretend to be more devout and active in the Lord's cause than you really are, then your card is stamped, 'Paid in full.' The expression was used in ancient times to indicate that a debt had been cancelled. The Lord doesn't have to repay you. You've already been paid in full by other people and by the glory you seek for your 'saintliness.'"

We face the constant temptation to show others how generous and devout we are. Jesus explodes that idea thoroughly in Matthew 6.

How to act and give as a true Christian

- Acts of righteousness (v. 1). The Greek word here was poorly translated in the KJV as alms. It means more than alms, including the entire realm of piety. If we put on a pious front, to be seen by others, we have no reward

from God. In fact, we could say that it nauseates Him because it is false and hypocritical.

- As a specific example of what God expects of us, Jesus used the case of alms-giving (v. 2-3). He said, “Don’t toot your own horn when you give to others.” Some Pharisees had a rams-horn player going before them to announce that they were about to give generously. When we give, we should do so in secret, symbolically not letting our left hand know what our right hand is giving. Of course, this is not literal. In our present-day society it is almost impossible to completely hide our giving. We want tax credit for it. Moreover, those who count the money after services, the office personnel and the church bookkeepers, know. But if our intent is to keep our gift secret, then our attitude is right. I used to like to give to the blind beggars in Brazil because they could not see what was given. Hopefully they were really blind and not like the blind man who, when he had sufficient money in his bowl, took off to go to a movie. The Lord can see everything done, in public or in secret, and rewards the one who give in secret.

- Another example is prayer (vs. 5-8). The religious leaders loved to pray standing in the synagogues, temple and street corners. Their purpose was again to be seen and respected. Jesus tells us to pray in secret. This is difficult in our hurried and harried life today. Privacy is sometimes hard to come by. It is difficult to even find sufficient time to pray as we should. And it is difficult to lead prayer in public without falling to the temptation to impress others with our “sincerity,” “stained-glass tone,” or “silver words.” Public prayer must be utterly humble and sincere. When we pray, whether in public or private, we must avoid endless words or repeated phrases that have little meaning. Jesus calls this babbling. Repetition of the Rosary, memorized creedal prayers and the like may fall into this category. Praying in “tongues” may also be in this category. Praying trite words may also be suspect. Examples: “And in the end, give us a home in Heaven and that will be enough.” “Guide, guard and direct us.”

- Jesus then gave His followers a model prayer (vs. 9-13). This was not to be a memorized prayer, repeated constantly word-for-word, but a structure on which to build sound prayers. It begins with praise to God and is followed by submission to Him, reliance on Him for our basic needs, repentance, request for protection from temptation and deliverance from the Evil One. In some, but not all, of the most ancient texts available, the prayer is ended with a sentence of praise. Some say that we can’t use this

prayer today because the Kingdom has already come. However, kingdom here means the rule of God and not necessarily the church. The rule of God is here, but not uniformly accepted by billions of people. Therefore, in the sense that the rule of God has not come to all peoples, it is still valid. “Your kingdom come” and “your will be done” are a parallelism. That is, two ways of saying the same thing, a style used often in Scripture to clarify and emphasize a point. Jesus closed His statement about prayer by emphasizing that our divine forgiveness is contingent on our forgiveness of others.

- Fasting. The “holy” men of Jesus’ time wanted everyone to know they were fasting by disfiguring their faces and dressing somberly. Again, to be praised for their piety. They were paid in full. But Jesus’ followers, who obviously fasted, were instructed to wash their faces and anoint their heads, so as not to appear to be fasting. Then they would receive their reward from God. Fasting in the New Testament was voluntary, not commanded. It was not a calendar item that all members were to obey. It was used at times of great import, such as sanctifying Barnabas and Saul for their mission task. Voluntary fasting is seen throughout the New Testament (Luke 2:37, Acts 14:23, 2 Corinthians 6:5). There are times today when fasting is called for — serious illness, death, catastrophes, beginning a new ministry ... When we went to Brazil, our team fasted and prayed the day and night before leaving — not at all for show, but to fulfill the deep need we felt to be consecrated for the task ahead. We seldom fast today and our overweight condition as a people shows it.

So where is our true shelter?

Let us vow to return to the kind of giving, praying and fasting Jesus showed us. Let us be transparent and sincere in all that we do and teach, and always in our example. The word sincere comes from “sin cere,” or unwaxed. In other words, our life is not to be hidden behind a few coats of varnish, but consistent with our profession of faith. Then our faith will give a feeling of peace and protection.

Chapter 24

Don't Let the Dow Get You Down

(Matthew 6:19-34)

Introduction

We have modest investments for our eventual retirement. They are modest because we were able to do little about annuities until after our 18 years in Brazil. Earlier, no church thought of providing a retirement plan for their workers, at least their missionaries. As a result, we came back to the States with few funds and a bleak financial future. So we tried very late to build up a nest egg. The current economic downturn leaves our nest egg badly cracked.

And you know what? We find ourselves feeling up or down like a yo-yo, depending on the daily state of the Dow Jones average. Its fluctuations should tell us something about the uncertain nature of investments.

Nothing about this life is certain. Yet, we hang onto life and possessions as if they were eternal. Jesus tells us about a better kind of investment, one that endures for now and eternity.

Treasures in Heaven

- First, we are not to store up treasures on earth. Why? Because they are fleeting. In the days of Christ on the earth, wealth was reckoned primarily in coins and expensive clothing. Yet moths destroyed clothing and “the eater” destroyed all. Most versions today conjecture that “brosis” (the eater) means rust, but not necessarily. The Greek word could have meant anything that destroyed. Metallic rust was the word “ios.” Nothing on this earth lasts, as we all know. If nature doesn’t destroy our possessions, thieves take them away. In those days walls were often made of baked mud bricks, easy to dig through. Our houses today may be a bit more sturdy, but still there is probably no way to keep determined and enterprising thieves out. Our cars are outdated as soon as we sign the papers on them. Our

computers are out of date within a few months after we buy them. Honors, medals, trophies, ribbons, crowns, plaques, certificates — all are of short duration. The honored person is soon forgotten. Our clothes go out of style or shrink. Our homes decay around us. Position, power, prestige — these are all very temporary ...

- Because things can become our god. Whatever of this world we love too much and devote too much time to can occupy our heart and our worship. Where our treasure is, there is our heart. We cannot serve both God and things at the same time. We will love one or the other but not both simultaneously. Actually, everything belongs to God. He only lets us use physical things for awhile. We are only caretakers of them. Does this mean we should not have savings or annuities? No, but we should not love or trust in these investments.

Quit worrying about things or even about life itself

Who does not worry and fret at times? It is the human condition, but it is not the way in which we are to act as followers of Jesus. He says, “Do not worry.”

- Not about life. Not about food, clothing or shelter. Life is more than these external things. If God takes care of the birds, providing them with food without fretting about it or planning how they will provide it, how much more will He care for us, because we are of much more value in His sight than a bird. Worrying about our life, our goods, our sustenance accomplishes nothing more than high blood pressure, depression and deteriorating health. All the worry in the world will not extend our life by even an hour and may well shorten it.

- Nor about clothing. Have you ever looked really closely at flowers. We planted some lily bulbs two years ago. Last year they did nothing. This year they produced many of the most exquisite red and speckled lilies. Brazil has some 8,000 varieties of orchids. The endless variety of flowers worldwide is awe-inspiring. If the Lord clothes the flowers so beautifully, will He not take care of us?

- So we should not worry about anything as non-Christians do. The Lord knows we need the basics of life and in one way or another will provide them. We have all seen this time and time again. Yet, we still worry.

There is a condition, however, to the Lord’s care for us (vs. 33). We must truly seek His kingdom and His righteousness. If we do this, He will care for us (1 Peter 5:7).

So where is our true shelter?

Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow. That is just borrowing trouble. Tomorrow has enough troubles of its own. It is a good thing that we can't see into the future. If we have trouble not fretting about today, how in the world could we handle all the problems that the future may hold? The key to life is living each day in our Lord's hands, trusting Him to provide, but not just sitting down waiting for Him to drop every blessing into our laps.

Chapter 25

Judging, Knocking, Entering and Fruit Picking

(Matthew 7:1-20)

Introduction

As parents, we gave our children a long list of do's and don't do's. Very often our admonitions had to be reinforced because they were ignored. The Sermon on the Mount has many admonitions, all vital to our living in Christ's shadow. The rest of Matthew is no exception. Its admonitions deal, among other things, with judging, knocking, entering and fruit picking.

Jesus continues to teach what it really means to be His follower. His instructions run counter to our normal human tendencies. We self-destruct if we follow our own instincts. Author Henry Fairlie, in **The Seven Deadly Sins Today**, says that "sin is the destruction of one's self, as well as the destruction of one's relationship with others," as well as with our Lord. We are constantly prone to bad-mouth others, to rely on our own resources, to follow the crowd and to pick forbidden fruit.

Jesus tells us that we are sinners. Therefore, we must turn to and follow Him in all things. Otherwise, we will continue to give in to our human instincts and sink into the despair of our own folly. This self-destructive direction is graphically described by Paul in Romans 1:18-32. In Romans 7:7-25 he says that if left to our own devices, we are slaves to sin. In Matthew 7 Jesus gives us instructions essential to our escape from slavery and achieving success as Christians.

Judging Others

- Do not judge, or you too will be judged — in like manner as you have judged. Is there anyone among us who has never judged others, perhaps rightly but often wrongly? The Indians had a saying, "Do not criticize

another until you have walked in his moccasins.” We cannot understand what is really going on in another’s heart. All we can do is look at some outward acts or attitudes and decide on the character of that person. The other person may be having a toothache, kidney stones, a bad-hair day, a conflict with spouse or family, a feeling of inferiority or failure, or even a serious health condition. The individual in question may have suffered some personal defeat or been the victim of mistreatment.

- Do not offer to fix another’s problem, or condemning him or her for it, when we may have a far more serious flaw in our lives. Jesus used hyperbole, or purposeful exaggeration, to make His point. Here he says we judge the speck in someone else’s eye when we have (in Greek) a log in our own eye. We are often blind to our own sins, but assume that we can see those of others clearly and are intolerant of them. Remember how David harshly judged the case of the rich man and poor man, yet could not see that Nathan’s parable was directed at him (2 Samuel 12:1ff).

- But what about the case of someone who is really doing wrong? Should we not do or say something? Jesus says that it is not necessary to press the truth on those who disdain or reject it. He says in verse 6 that we are not to share holy things with dogs or cast our pearls to swine. The dogs will tear them apart and the swine will trample on them. Proverbs 9:7 says, “He who corrects a scoffer gets himself abuse.” I have worked in the secular world as a graphic artist, thrown daily into the company of other artists who were ungodly and profane. Anything noble I said was twisted out of context. This was a clear case of tossing pearls to swine. My colleagues, with one or two exceptions, were likable but totally mundane.

Persistence in prayer

I’m a persistent sort in a lot of endeavors. If something doesn’t work, I try a different angle. But this doesn’t hold very true in my prayer life. I pray two or three times about something and then tend to forget about it or perhaps to give up on it entirely.

- Jesus says to keep on asking, seeking and knocking. The poor widow got what she wanted from the unjust judge because she wore him down with her persistence (Luke 18:3-5). I have seldom worn the Lord down with persistent prayer, yet Jesus says that if we continue to ask, we will receive; if we continue to seek, we will find; if we continue to knock, the door will eventually be opened to us. Do we really believe this, in the face of disappointments over our prayers? Jesus says that any father will

provide bread and fish (food) for his children, not stones or snakes. If we know to do this much, how much more God knows how to provide for us. Our problem is that our prayer level may be pretty minimal. We don't ask, and therefore we don't receive. Of course, we can ask amiss, with wrong motives (James 4:3).

The narrow and wide gates

In the 19th century many church leaders, even in the Restoration Movement, believed along with scientists that a golden age was coming — a true millennium in which all people would turn to God. This was a dream only, not based on reality. Two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan, along with countless other civil conflicts, have taught us that mankind has not improved, despite all of our technological breakthroughs, but has gone downhill, like the monkey's comment about evolution: "Man descended, the ornery cuss, but brother, he didn't descend from us."

So where is our true shelter?

Jesus told us a long time ago that the way to social and moral improvement is only by a narrow path that leads to life, with relatively few finding it. We must do all we can to save others, but must confess that relatively few will turn to the Lord. Most will go on their merry way along the broad path — the expressway — that leads to destruction. Far from universal salvation, Jesus teaches us that the way to Heaven is not easy and is against the flow of the crowd. We find ourselves becoming more and more like the world, so we may appear to have joined the mob. We must come out from among them and be separate — a holy people, a royal priesthood (2 Corinthians 6:17, 1 Peter 2:9-12).

Chapter 26

Telling the Good Guys from the Bad

(Matthew 7:15-29)

Introduction

It isn't always easy to distinguish between the good guys and the bad guys. Is that why in Westerns the good guys wear white hats and the bad guys wear black hats?

In ancient Egypt the pharaoh was worshiped as a god. In Roman times, Nero accepted worship and Domitian demanded it. Through the ages there have been self-proclaimed “saviors” who offered the world to their followers. Muhammed called himself the last and greatest prophet, even above Jesus. Another example was Hitler, who attempted to create a Third Reich, or kingdom, with Germans as the Master Race, ruling the world. Hirohito was considered a god until Japan was defeated in 1945; Mao Tse-tung was reverently followed and his sayings were recorded in a “sacred” book. Jim Jones, David Koresh and others were idolized, to the death of their disciples. Osama bin Laden's followers blow themselves up as martyrs for his cause. Kim Jong-il, dictator of North Korea, has almost god-like status in his country. Because bad guys are difficult to recognize until too late, Jesus warns us to watch carefully for them.

Recognize false teachers by their fruit

- False prophets and lying leaders often come in sheep's clothing. They may even smell like sheep. But inside they are wolves, the sheep's worst enemy. We must ever guard against them. They penetrate the church and lead congregations away. Just recently some very slick men penetrated a local church in Dallas and drew it away into a pentecostal type of group. They began by active participation, then deaconship, then eldership and then control. Sooner or later what they produce will be evident to all.
- Jesus reminds us that grapes don't grow from thorn bushes or figs from

thistles. Each bears its own kind of produce. A good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bad fruit. There can be no jumping back and forth between the two. The bad producer is cut down and burnt. We had to destroy a large peach tree in our back yard because, although it still produced fairly good fruit, it was rotten inside and therefore dangerous.

- We need to be careful, however, that in our zeal to expose bad fruit, we judge it bad by our own opinion. One thriving church in the far East was sued by an individual for its valuable church property because that person claimed the church was heretic. His argument was based on his own opinion of what is doctrinal soundness. How much of what we believe is more opinion, preference or tradition than real Scripture. In that, we are like people who say that a prayer at school graduation is unconstitutional. That is their opinion, not backed up by the Constitution. What does it really say about religion? “Congress shall make no law establishing religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Our government officials (and many others) have it all wrong. The burden is on Congress to abstain from establishing any official religion and never to prohibit our freedom of religious expression. Yet, this is being done continually. So, in government, as well as religion, opinion seems to outweigh what the text really says.

Walk the walk and don’t just talk the talk

- Truly entering and remaining in the Kingdom is more than just saying we are Christians (verses 21-23). Only those who do God’s will can partake of Heaven.

- Many will wail on the Day of Judgment that they have done many mighty deeds in the Lord’s name — prophesying, teaching, working miracles — but all of this is in vain if it is not done according to the Lord’s Word and His will. He will expel them because He never knew them in the spiritual sense. Billy Graham has done many wonderful things and has taught many wonderful truths, but he falls short of all that the Lord teaches in the area of conversion. Mother Teresa was a wonderful, caring, sacrificing woman, but had never, to my knowledge, become a Christian according to our Lord’s standards.

- However, the matter is even more complex. Some who begin the Christian life correctly fall away and are rejected by their Lord (Galatians 1:6). Not everyone who lives by the Christian code of rules and works will enter Heaven. If they obey Christ’s law by constraint and negatively, they

would not be comfortable in Heaven even if they went there — too much joy there for their nature!

Building on rock vs. building on sand

- In verses 24-27 Jesus concluded his sermon with a strong parable about putting into practice what He has taught us. He said that the truly wise person not only hears His words, but puts them into practice. They are like a man building his house on a solid foundation. If a storm comes, it will stand because it is built on the rock. (I'm not sure that He meant a tornado, here.) All of us face the strong winds of adversity — disappointment, loss of job, financial reverses, a home destroyed by fire or some other calamity, divorce, injury, illness, death — but if our life is built on the rock of Christ and faith in Him, we will continue to stand. We will say with Job, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

- The unhearing and undoing person builds a life on sand. In our city in Brazil, much like San Francisco in topography, many build hillside homes out over the void, with spindly pillars holding them up. Not smart! The rainy season brings 50 or 60 or more inches of rain. The hill gives way and these houses, some very expensive, collapse. Hurricanes devastated New Orleans and other nearby regions. It was to be expected that many people would lose their homes and businesses. Why? They built below sea level and trusted in levees to protect them. Very bad idea! Many people in our materialistic age build and build — things, toys, funds and fun — but their life has no lasting foundation. Somehow, we must find a way to penetrate to the foundation of their life and point out the serious and eternal cracks.

So where is our true shelter?

Jesus spoke a straight message with authority. The crowds were amazed by His teaching. He didn't quote all of the Supreme Court decisions and minority views. He spoke as and for God.

Our task is to build our lives on solid rock, guided by our Master Architect, Jesus. I have seen many a structure built on fill. Not many years will pass until the owners will have to call in the foundation repair people. The first house in which we lived in Brazil was built over a drainage creek. Cracks appeared in the walls and even on the kitchen counter. The owner blamed us, but we countered by reminding him that his house was constructed on an unsure base and cracks were the inevitable result.

What kind of life are we building: on the rock of Jesus or the sand of this world? Our only true shelter is Jesus.

Chapter 27

Words Can Cut or Cure

(Matthew 12:28-45)

Introduction

Have you ever been bad-mouthed? We all have at some time or other. In my position as managing editor of *The Christian Chronicle*, I was constantly criticized and could never fully be inoculated against it. And it didn't matter the nature of the subject in a particular issue of the paper. Someone could always find fault with it. Harmful words cut, even if they are true, and cut to the core, if they are false or twisted.

Words can separate friends and couples. Words can destroy relationships in any realm. Words can also cure hurts. They can be like balm for a wound. But you know, it takes many, many good words to counter one bad one. I don't remember many compliments in the past, but certainly remember the accusations laid against me.

Jesus spent most of His ministry suffering terrible things said to His face and behind His back. From early on, His enemies had spies watching Him and reporting on what He said and did. Repeated several times by his adversaries, His words ended up being distorted. During most of His ministry the scribes and Pharisees were His principle enemies. They were the "keepers" of orthodoxy (or rather, of their interpretations of orthodoxy). Only near the end of His ministry did the Sadducees (the temple keepers, politicians and "friends" of Rome) enter the fray to attempt to destroy Him.

Here are some examples of conflict between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees, and how Jesus handled them:

Accused of being empowered by Beelzebub (Matthew 12:22-30)

Beelzebub (or in Greek, Beelzeboul) apparently comes from the early Hebrew Baalzebub, which means "Lord of the Flies" or "Lord of the High Places." In any case it referred to the supreme Baal of the Canaanites and many of the Philistines. To the Israelites, Baalzebub was a demon and

in fact, the prince of demons. In the New Testament it had the meaning, generally, of Satan or the highest of the evil spirits. Linking Jesus to Beelzebub was about the worst thing that could be said about Him.

He answered that such an action was impossible, because if He were doing so, it would be Satan working against Satan, and Satan's agent undermining Satan's power. He argued that every kingdom or household divided against itself cannot stand. A king would not willingly undermine his own position. A wise family would not divide up into factions. In either case, the result is destructive. Jesus contrasted Satan's kingdom and His own Kingdom. If He were driving out demons by the Spirit of God, that was proof that the Kingdom has come.

The reference to the strong man being robbed may mean that Satan is stronger than humans, but Jesus is stronger than Satan and is able to overcome him. Then He said that we either draw people into the Kingdom or we force them from it by our words and actions. We must either be for Him or against Him. Neutrality is impossible.

Accused of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31-37; Mark 3:21, 28-30).

Blasphemy is the act of speaking evil against beings or things sacred. The Jewish leaders accused Jesus of blasphemy — of lying, deceiving, using magic, working through Satan's power while claiming to be God's Son.

Jesus told them that they were the blasphemers. They were speaking evil of Divinity itself and more specifically, of the Holy Spirit. To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit is to revile God's channel of revelation. His revealed will comes to humankind through the mediation of the Spirit. If we revile the revelation and the power behind it, or attribute that revelation to some other source, we are belittling God's Word and are therefore blaspheming. There is no hope of salvation for the one who does that. The one sin that is unforgiven by God is that of cursing His Spirit and the inspired Word the Spirit has brought to us. There is no hope for such a person, neither in our human era nor in the eternal era to come. This is serious, indeed. Yet it is done frequently by those who are ignorant of what they are doing, don't care or hate things spiritual. I have heard Muslims and others say, "You can't believe that Bible. It has been corrupted over the centuries." Surely blasphemy! Or supposed believers who reject the virgin birth of Christ or His divinity. Surely blasphemy! Even those who say that baptism is not really essential for salvation? Surely blasphemy!

The awesome power of words to save or destroy (Matthew 12:33-37)

The Pharisees were corrupt of heart, even though they were outwardly very pious. They would deliver an innocent man to death with no concern, but would not enter the Roman headquarters to do that delivering for fear of becoming “unclean.” Fruit shows the nature of the tree at its heart. They produced evil fruit in the name of righteousness. Jesus called them a “brood of vipers,” — a nest of rattlers — dangerous and talking with a forked tongue. From the heart (recesses of the mind) comes all words. Out of the heart are the issues of life (Proverbs 4:23). The good heart upbuilds, encourages or even rebukes with tenderness. The evil heart does just the opposite. From the rattler’s mouth only poison can flow.

So where is our true shelter?

We are responsible for our words. Careless words are those blurted out without foundation or forethought, or with malice. For every such word we will be held accountable in the Judgment. This is an area of life where all of us fall. We must learn to bridle our tongues (James 3:6-12). Yet this is so difficult to do. I once rode a wild stallion. He got the bit in his teeth and away he went out of my control. So it often is with our words. Even with every good intention, we can hurt others with our words. And how often we may really have an ulterior motive behind what we say — some hidden agenda or some hypocritical attitude. Control of our tongues is a sign of real Christian maturity.

Our true shelter is in Christ — turning our lives, thoughts, motives and tongues over to Him.

Chapter 28

We Carry Around Too Much Baggage

(Luke 12:13-48)

Introduction

On a trip, do you ever carry too much more than you need? I almost always take more baggage than is required, due in part to my wife's concern that I might not have enough. The smart traveler carries relatively little, but it is versatile and easy to wash. Some people board a plane with a ton of carry-on baggage, really too big and heavy for the overhead bins, and today are probably charged for it.

All of us carry much baggage — more goods than we need, more clothes, more toys, more jewelry ... Our entire economy is built on overbuying. We go to the hardware store to buy six nails. Can we buy just six? No, they come packaged in quantities of 36. And we carry much baggage around in the realms of hurts, ill will, avarice, envy, frustrations, overly-active ambitions, personal mistakes and sins, and a host of other things. Jesus warned us time and time again to rid ourselves of so much baggage and move to a simpler, more trusting life style. Here are some teachings He gave on this subject:

The folly of loving riches too much (Luke 12:13-21)

A bystander one day in a crowd listening to Jesus asked Him to arbitrate in his case against his brother, who apparently had not properly divided the family estate. Jesus' answer was scathing: "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Greed is one of the deadliest of sins because, Midas-like, the greedy person's wealth may well destroy him or her.

As He did so often, Jesus used a parable to hammer home His lesson. He talked about the rich farmer (probably not an Oklahoman) whose crops were so good that he ran out of storage places for them. So he tore down

his storage sheds and built larger ones. Then he said, “I have enough for many years. I’ll just be a couch potato. I’ll eat, drink and be merry.” He borrowed a chapter right out of the book of the Greek Epicureans, who lived just for today. But God had the final word: “You fool! I’m calling in your life this very night. Then what will happen to all this stuff you stockpiled?”

Jesus was not necessarily condemning wealth as such, but, rather, a bad attitude toward it. If we store up goods and wealth just to use on ourselves, we are lost. We need to remember, as did Job, that “naked came I out of my mother’s womb and naked shall I return.” We have nothing that is really ours. It is all on loan to us. Right now here in Oklahoma we could use a good rain, but we are helpless to make it rain. Our only recourse is prayer. God will send rain when He decides. He will provide as He wills.

Trusting God to provide (Luke 12:22-34)

One of our family sayings is, “Want to borrow a jack?” A man had a flat tire on a dark night along a country road and discovered that he had no jack in his car. He spotted the dim outline of a farmhouse, so he walked there to borrow a jack. As he approached the house, he began to have doubts: “What if they are not home? What if there’s a dog? What if they think I’m a thief and shoot me?” He was so worked up by the time he got there that he pounded on the door and shouted, “I wouldn’t borrow your stupid jack even if you had one!”

We are all worrywarts about some things. Yet Jesus says, “Don’t fret it. Don’t worry about your life, your food or your clothing. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing.” He also reminds us that, if God takes care of the ravens and the lilies of the field, won’t He much more care for us? Jesus said that all the worry in the world will not add an inch to our height or a day to our life, and in fact, may well shorten our life. We can’t worry a single hour onto our lives. If we can’t even do that, why worry about the rest?

We are to be provide purses that will not wear out or be stolen. What did He mean by that? Treasure in Heaven, where thieves cannot enter. If our treasure is on earth, then our heart will be centered on earthly things. If our treasure is truly in Heaven, then our heart will be concentrated on Heaven. This is difficult in our material age. We want to provide for ourselves, our family and our future. Yet, the future is totally in God’s hands. God knows what we need and will provide in His own way and time if we seek Him.

Keeping an eye peeled (Luke 12:35-48)

Do we really believe that Jesus might come at any moment? Many may be like those who said, “The Lord delays His coming, so why worry?” (verse 45). There tend to be two extremes here: One is that dates are set and announced for His return, despite the fact that He said no one knows that schedule except God in Heaven. The other is that no thought is given at all to the fact that He is coming again. Both are foolish!

We need to keep a sharp lookout for the Lord’s return. He won’t come when we expect Him, but as a thief in the night — at a calm, peaceful moment when no one expects Him. We need to be ready at any moment for His coming. Only those who are prepared will be invited in to His feast.

So where is our true shelter?

The foolish person is the one who says, “All this talk of end times and judgment is silly. I’m going to run my life my way!” Or as Sinatra sang, “I did it my way.” We have been given much, so much will be demanded of us. These verses seem to teach that there will be degrees of punishment. The one knowing what to do with his life and doesn’t do it will be punished more severely. The ignorant person will be punished less severely.

The wise servant is the one who is working diligently in his Master’s cause when He comes (or when terminal illness or death overtakes him). This kind of servant has a built-in shelter in the shadow of Jesus’ hand.

Chapter 29

The Christian — Citizen of Two Countries

(Matthew 22:15-22, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-2)

Introduction

The New Testament teaches us that human cultures are not all good or all bad. There is both good and evil in them. Any element of a culture that is clearly contrary to God's will and teaching is to be rejected by His followers. On the contrary, any element that is good can be utilized by Christians, as long as its use doesn't take an undue amount of time and attention away from Christian devotion and service.

The difficulty for us, as Christians, is in determining a consistent course of action in relation to the culture or cultures within which we live. Too little contact with the culture around us isolates us to the point where we have no influence at all on it. Too much contact with the culture can eventually soil our hearts and make it impossible to have a positive influence on those about us.

One of the major dilemmas we face as Christians is how to deal with politics and government. Do we have biblical guidelines on this matter? Certainly. Let us look at some teachings in the New Testament about Christ, the church and civil government.

Steering a straight path through civil authority

When Jesus was asked if it was proper for Jews to pay taxes to the Romans, their pagan conquerors (Matthew 22:15-22), what did He answer? He called for a Roman coin and asked whose inscription was on it. When his inquisitors answered, "Caesar's," He answered, "Then give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." The coin symbolized civil authority. The Romans provided and kept up excellent roads, protected the empire from terrorists and the sea from pirates. They guarded the frontiers against invaders. They kept the Pax Romana, or Roman Peace.

Rome owned the Empire, even though in many ways it was evil and some officials were corrupt. Therefore, said Jesus, the Jewish people owed taxes to Rome.

On the contrary, the Jews and all peoples were to give to God what is God's.

He gave us everything — food, drink, shelter, clothing, the air we breathe, the water we drink ... He gave us salvation and hope through Christ. He gave us inner peace and purpose. He gave us the church as a holy family of blessing and mutual comfort. He gave us both physical and spiritual life. We therefore owe God everything. Nothing we own is really ours. It is merely loaned to us by our merciful God for our use and for blessing others. All humans must give their lives to God because we owe Him everything.

Government and civil structures are ordained by God (Romans 13:1). We disobey God when we disobey civil authority, no matter how corrupt it may be. Remember that Paul was talking about Rome, led often by evil, immoral emperors. The Christian who rebels against this authority or breaks its laws is rebelling against God (Romans 13:2). We are therefore to honor and submit to officials, obey them and pay our proper taxes (Romans 13:5-7).

The only exception

The only exception to this principle is if a government law runs counter to clear Christian doctrine. When the apostles were being tried by the Jewish Sanhedrin for their doctrine and were ordered to cease preaching in the name of Jesus, they answered, "We must obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29). Later on, when first Nero and then Domitian came to the throne, Christians were ordered to bow to the emperor's image and offer incense to him, just as all others were doing. It was a case of confessing, "Caesar is Lord." This Christians couldn't do, because it would violate their higher allegiance to Christ. They refused and many were executed because of it. They were accused of being subversive and actually wishing ill to the government and its gods by their refusal to bow to the image of Caesar.

Now let us apply this principle to our world today. Imagine that a presidential decree came down demanding that all preachers be approved by the government after taking a course in political correctness. Would we quietly submit to this?

Or what if the government decreed that homosexuals have an equal right with others to be ministers of a church? Any church which did not conform would be closed. How should we respond?

Or even worse, what if the government decreed that all churches be closed and that no more prayers could be offered to God or preaching done about Christ, on penalty of imprisonment? How would you respond? How would your congregation respond? Early Christians obeyed the Roman authorities, except when they were forced to bow to an image of the Caesar. When it was demanded of them to make a choice between “Caesar is Lord” or “Christ is Lord,” most chose Christ and were persecuted, even to the point of being killed.

However, just because we believe the government is dictatorial or corrupt is no reason to disobey its laws. Just because we think taxes are unfair is no excuse for failing to pay taxes. God’s Word tells us to pay tribute to whom tribute is due (Romans 13:6-7). And it orders us to honor those who have authority over us (1 Peter 2:13-17). Paul says in Romans 13:1-7 that we are to be submissive to human authorities.

Prayer for authorities and governments

Regardless of the condition of our government, and surely because if its condition, we are to pray for our civil leaders regularly, rather than criticizing them and plotting against them. This is something that American Christians and churches seldom do. Yet, we are commanded in Scripture to do so. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 2:1-2 to “make requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving for everyone — for kings and for all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives ... ”

In an article on “How to Pray for the President” (*Christian Standard*, July 6, 1986:1,11), Carl Malm suggested that Psalm 72 is a coronation prayer on behalf of a new king. In analyzing this psalm, Malm makes the following points:

- Pray for God’s will to be done in the decisions of government — “Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness.”
- Pray for national leaders to end injustice and oppression — “May he defend the afflicted among the people; may he save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor.”
- Pray for success against those who would destroy our nation.

(This is especially appropriate today as we face a perilous yet hidden foe in militant terrorism.)

- Pray for national policies that will bring prosperity — “Let grain abound through the land ... ”

To these I would add:

- Pray that the leaders of our country be people of integrity and morality.

“Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” and especially to those in positions of leadership (Proverbs 14:34).

- Pray that the government be favorably disposed toward Christian faith and service.
- Pray regularly for leaders by name. This includes those in local city, district, county, parish, state, national and international levels. Pray for our police, our firemen and our city servants. Pray for those who serve in our state government and especially, for those leading our federal government. James says that the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous person avails much before God’s throne (James 5:16). Who knows what effect our prayers might have on the future of our country and world?

Citizens of a higher country

Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:19 that Christians are citizens of a higher country; that is, a heavenly realm. While we retain our earthly connection to a country, we actually have dual citizenship — one on earth and the other in Heaven. Our first allegiance is to Heaven and to Heaven’s ruler. That is the citizenship we most treasure and protect. We do nothing to besmirch that country, its citizenship or its fellow citizens. We are all comrades on the way home. Often, when I have arrived at a U.S. port of entry and show my passport, an agent says, “Welcome home,” or words to that effect. It is truly a privilege for me to be an American citizen, but it is an even greater privilege to be a citizen of Heaven.

Do you remember the sad tale of Philip Nolan, the “Man Without a Country”? He was a young U.S. Army lieutenant who developed a friendship with Aaron Burr. When Burr was tried for treason, Nolan was tried as an accomplice. During his testimony, Nolan bitterly denounced his nation, angrily shouting “ ... I wish I may never hear of the United States again!” Upon conviction, the judge icily granted Nolan his wish:

he was to spend the rest of his life aboard warships of the United States Navy, in exile, with no right to ever again set foot on U.S. soil, and with no mention ever again made to him about his country. What a foolish outburst, with lifelong consequences, which later he bitterly regretted! How many people, like Nolan, take so lightly their national citizenship and even their Heavenly citizenship.

So where is our true shelter?

Governments and government leaders exist by God's will. He places them in positions of authority to carry out His will for civil life. We must respect their delegated authority, the only exception being if they demand of us something that we cannot do as Christians. And we are to pray regularly for government leaders, from the least to the highest.

We must also pray for elders, deacons, evangelists, missionaries, teachers and others serving in the Lord's Kingdom. We must respect their delegated authority and responsibility. Moreover, we must represent well our eternal country and its King, Jesus. This is our greatest of all citizenships, a constant shelter against the world's intrigues.

Chapter 30

Born to a New Life

(John 3:3-5, Romans 6:4, 1 Corinthians 5:7,
2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15, Ephesians 4:24, 1 Peter 1:3)

Introduction

Have you ever wanted to start over with a clean slate? Have you ever longed to undo your wrongs and make things right? Have you ever wished to be cleansed from the sins that smudge your life? If asked, most people express regret over things in their past — their wasted years — and wish they could begin all over.

Some seek a new beginning by leaving their home and employment, to look for a place in which to begin anew. This sentiment motivated pioneers to trek across unknown lands to find a place of renewal. It has been expressed through abandoning one's spouse and family. I know one man, now 60 or older, who, at 50, left his wife for a young “trophy” wife of 20. It has been expressed in taking night or Internet courses, in order to train for a new profession. In my case, I sought a new beginning at 40, taking my family to Brazil to engage in missions.

Yes, there appears to be an urge in us to better our situation in life — an urge to purge away our past. How we seek to fulfill this urge is all-important. The Apostle Paul shows us a more excellent way in which to accomplish the urge.

The more excellent way

Paul expressed, in beautiful imagery, the way of true agape — love that is self-sacrificing. However, in order to make that level of love our own, we must first be cleansed of our sins and enter into a productive new life in Christ.

God's Word makes it clear that our lives are too sinful to be cleansed by our own will (Romans 1:11-23). Then, in Romans 7:15-25, Paul warned us that while we want to do good, evil is right there with us.

Benjamin Franklin was a pragmatist. He believed that he could conquer his own weaknesses by himself. So at the beginning of a year, he listed 12 of his major negative tendencies, vowing to conquer one each month. He did fairly well through February, but by March, when he looked back, he found that he had already lapsed on his January “conquest.”

We cannot turn our lives around, to find a more excellent way by ourselves. We need divine intervention. This our Lord offers to us.

Born to a new life

Jesus had a nighttime discussion with Jewish leader Nicodemus about the necessity of a new birth (John 3:1-20). Nicodemus was totally confused, asking, “How can a man be born again when he is old?” His thinking was physical, while that of Jesus was spiritual. The Lord cleared up the matter by explaining, “Unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.”

To become a U.S. citizen is an expensive process, now requiring a payment of \$600, plus photos, paper work, an examination and a swearing in. Citizenship in God’s Kingdom also comes at a high price. It requires a death, a new birth and a life dedicated totally to the Lord. From our burial with Christ in baptism, we arise to begin a new life (Romans 6:1-14, 2 Corinthians 5:17). When we enter into our new life in Christ, we are new creatures. Our old life is gone; our new life has begun.

What does this mean? He or she who stole steals no more. He or she who cheated cheats no more. He or she who was unfaithful is unfaithful no more. He or she who was immoral is immoral no more. He or she who is addicted to bad and unhealthy practices does so no more. He or she who lives for self only lives for self no more. You get the picture — a total transformation is called for.

Transformation not instantaneous

However, this transformation is not instantaneous. A baby begins to crawl and finally to toddle, falling frequently. Finally comes successful walking and running. It is like this with the new creature in Christ. He or she is a work in progress. With God’s help, crawling gives way to walking. Baby formulas give way to solid food, hopefully, not junk food. (1 Peter 2:2).

So where is our true shelter?

The Christian life is one of being born into God’s family and then maturing in it (1 Peter 1:23). The Christian life is not for the undecided or lukewarm,

nor for those moved only by the emotion of the moment, those shallow of heart or those unwilling to shed their many material and emotional burdens, as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Soils (Matthew 13:1-23). I recall a man who attended an entire campaign, led in part by U.S. college students. He was so excited by the singing and the very presence of the students. During the campaign he was baptized, shouting for joy as he came up out of the water. Do you know what? He disappeared right after the campaign, never to be seen again.

The Christian life calls for absolute dedication and servanthood. It is only for those willing and ready to be crucified with Christ and raised with Him to walk in newness of life. If we do this, we can be assured of a safe haven with our Lord.

Chapter 31

By Nature a Servant

**(Zechariah 3:8, Matthew 20:26-28, Luke 14:25-27,
Romans 1:1, Philippians 2:7, Colossians 1:23, 2 Timothy 2:24)**

Introduction

We Americans have an aversion to being any kind of slave or servant. We are independent types, as the Jews who told Jesus that they had never been slaves of anyone. (How soon they forgot that their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt.)

Many wives rebel against being submissive to their husbands and many husbands fail to realize that they have a head over them, Christ, to whom they must answer (1 Corinthians 11:3). Children rebel against the authority of their parents, teachers, school administrators and even the law. Employees reject the authority of those over them. Perhaps only in the military is there a chain of command that must be respected (Luke 7:1-10). It just might be that a period of required military could teach every young person respect for authority.

Even more damaging to the soul is the person who denies the authority of Christ, His Word and His appointed elders. Such individuals fail to understand that the Christian is by nature a *doulos* (in Greek, a slave).

The Christian as a servant

Jesus set the example for us. In a narration about the mentality of the true servant, He said,

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife, his children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26-27).

He further described the nature of servanthood, including Himself in this requirement for following Him:

“... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and

whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:26-28). He even demonstrated His servant mentality by washing the feet of His disciples, the task of a household slave (John 13:1-16).

Servanthood requires relinquished ownership

When we enter the Christian Way, we leave behind all ownership. We are no longer ours, for we have been bought at great price (1 Corinthians 6:20, 7:23). As Paul said, we have been crucified with Christ and no longer live, but Christ lives in us (Galatians 2:20).

This is most difficult to accomplish, because it cuts against the grain of our upbringing, culture and consumer society. We rebel against giving up ourselves and our wishes for the sake of Christ and others.

Achieving this level of servanthood

As Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, so symbolically, we must learn to wash the feet of others. We must learn to lay aside our own comforts and desires in order to serve. This we can accomplish by having our hands and hearts open to opportunities to serve. Here are some examples:

- Adopt children into our homes and youth into our arms. This adoption process may be only sponsoring an orphan in some other part of the world, or legally adopting a child or children.
- Become a mentor to some young person or someone new in the faith.
- Sponsor new families in the church.
- Engage in benevolence and service projects of the church. Give special care to the elderly and ill. Help with providing and distributing food during the Holiday season.
- Visit the hospitalized.
- Mail “appreciation” cards to visitors, those celebrating a special occasion and those who are ill and grieving.
- Help with wedding receptions, showers, meals following a funeral, fellowship gatherings.
- Help maintain church property inside and out.
- Mow the lawns of the elderly and infirm.

- Provide food for the hungry, ill, shut-in and elderly.
- During the Fall rake up the leaves in the yards of older people.
- Assist in children's, youths' and other classes.
- Make bonnets and blankets for the newborn.
- Sew or otherwise provide clothing for disadvantaged children.
- Participate in evangelism and mission campaigns.
- Assist in disaster relief efforts.
- Carpool others to church services.
- Help find employment for those out of work.
- Assist members in moving.
- Engage in a prison ministry.
- Work with Bible correspondence students.
- Teach others English, using the Bible as a text (Friendspeak, for example).
- Help prepare and teach Bible classes.
- Assist with worship preparation, church music, powerpoint, sound and lighting in the church building.

There may be many more such opportunities in which to serve, but these can at least get us headed in the right direction.

So where is our true shelter?

I knew one woman in Brazil who was a spiritist, believing in reincarnation. She despised the poor, but by helping them, she felt that she was gaining a higher level of existence in her next life. What do you think? Was she deceived by a superstitious system? Was she gaining any spiritual credit for her service?

We are by nature servants and it is far better to serve than to be served. However, our service must be unselfish and self-denying. If we serve merely to be seen and appreciated, what we do may be valuable, but we gain no credit with the Lord.

Our true security is in following Jesus as a servant, not seeking our own will, but His.

Chapter 32

Integral Member of a Family

**(1 Corinthians 1:10; Ephesians 2:19, 3:14;
1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 2:5)**

Introduction

In our American society today the nuclear family (husband, wife and children under one roof) is becoming increasingly endangered. It was reported in December 2008 that 80% of African-American homes have only a single parent, generally a woman, attempting to lead and provide for her family. This means that most of the children in such homes grow up without a positive male role model to follow. Among caucasian families the situation may not be much better, with many homes fractured by abuse, abandonment, infidelity and divorce.

This doesn't bode well for the future, does it? The basic building block for our people in past generations has been the nuclear family, or perhaps the nuclear family plus grandparents. But now the nucleus of the nuclear family has cracked wide open. It doesn't take a genius to see that we are heading for structural disaster. Margie and I have been married for 60 years and we're looked on by some as a sort of miracle or an oddity. My grandparents and parents celebrated 50 and 55 years of marriage, respectively, sometimes blissful and sometimes difficult. Now, however, 25 or 30 years of marriage is something of a rarity. Even if couples remain together, in many cases they have serious conflicts.

The New Testament describes the church as the family or household of God. Yet, how can moderns appreciate the profound meaning of this symbolism if they see few examples of marital loyalty and strength about them?

Let us see if we can recapture something of the meaning of marriage and the home and then analyze the family analogy as presented in the Bible.

Familyhood in the Old Testament

It started in Eden, when the first mating of a man and a woman was sanctified by the Lord Himself. As bone of the man's bones and flesh of his flesh, she was joined to him and he to her.

"For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

This relationship, called a sacred covenant, was emphasized more than once in the Old Testament. In Proverbs 5:15-19 we find a delightful description of marital love. The son being taught by Solomon was urged to share his love only with his wife — "a loving doe, a graceful deer, whose breasts were to satisfy him always." The entire book of Song of Solomon (or Song of Songs) poetically describes marital love in graphic detail.

Solomon also warned his son, and all of us, against the adulterous woman who leaves her partner and flaunts the covenant she had made with him before God (Proverbs 2:16-17).

In Malachi 2:13-15 the faithless husband is condemned for having broken faith with his partner, the wife of his marriage covenant. Then the Lord spoke, "I hate divorce" (Malachi 2:16). Is this clear, or should we repeat it, in light of how marriages today are being fractured in absolute disregard for God's hatred of divorce.

More is involved here, however, than just marital relations. The Lord said of Abraham, "... for I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just ..." (Genesis 18:19).

Exodus 20:12 commands God's people to honor their parents. Although a part of the Ten Commandments given to the Israelites, the principle behind it is every bit as valid today as it was when recorded on stone by God Himself.

Proverbs 1 through 7 record a father's instructions to his son about the essentiality of wisdom and sound moral behavior.

The New Testament and the human family

Moses had permitted divorce. By the time of Jesus, Jewish leadership had given in to society's demand, making divorce easy for men (but not for women). When challenged by the religious authorities about divorce, He responded by returning to God's initial design for marriage:

“... Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way in the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matthew 19:8-9).

There it is, whether we like it or not. To Jesus, the bedrock of society is the sacred and permanent bond of marriage.

Paul further developed the theme of family relations in Ephesians 5:22-33.

- Wives must submit to the authority of their husbands. That sounds so politically incorrect! Yes, it does, but it is absolutely correct in the Lord’s hierarchy of authority. The husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the church. And husbands, never forget that you have a head over you — Jesus!

- Husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies, just as Christ loves the church and gave Himself for her. This is the divine counterbalance to the wife’s submission to her husband. He will love her and do her good, just as Christ loves the church and does her good.

- Finally, children are to honor and obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1-4). To counterbalance this, parents are not to exasperate their children, but rather, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

The family of God

Now, applying these principles to the spiritual realm, we find that the church is God’s family in this age (Ephesians 3:14). As His family or household, the church is firmly connected to her head, Christ (Ephesians 2:19, 1 Timothy 3:15, 1 Peter 2:5). She is submissive and loyal to Him.

Her members love one another at the agape level. They go out of their comfort zone to help each other. They sacrifice themselves for the good of the church family. There is no place in their lives for rancor, revenge, hatred, gossip or ill-will in any way against their fellow Christians. We all know of cases in which fellow members sit in worship as far away as possible from their “enemy.” They never forget a slight. They never forgive. In one church for which I served as minister, I found that there were more ex-members in the community than practicing members, so I proceeded to draw some of these dropouts back into the fellowship of the church. Some members objected, saying, “We drove this riff-raff away years ago and now the preacher is bringing them back!” Such behavior is never fitting for members of Christ’s family.

God's family is united in one mind, heart and judgment (1 Corinthians 1:10). I recall a moment in our work in Brazil. We were teaching Brazilian brothers how to work in concert to arrive at decisions. In this instance we were divided over a matter, with a one-man majority in favor of it. I suggested that we revisit this issue later. "Why?" asked one brother. "We won, didn't we?" "Technically, yes," I answered, "but we are not united. We need to arrive at a decision that is more single-minded." Eventually, we did arrive at a consensus on the issue. I believed that this process taught all of the brothers the need for being of one mind.

So where is our true shelter?

The church is God's family. She is fully submissive to His authority. She is His living and loving bride. As a human family should be loving and united, in the same manner the church should be loving and united. This is the proof par excellence of our authenticity as the Lord's church. To this end we should constantly strive as His church. It is in the fellowship of Christ and His earthly family that we find shelter.

Chapter 33

Faithful Unto Death

(Ecclesiastes 5:2-4, Matthew 25:34-36, Revelation 2:10)

Introduction

Faithfulness to one's mate, employers, nation, commitments, loan payments and church is no longer considered to be that important. It is all about "Me" and what I want. If it no longer suits me to stay with that woman, I'm out of here. If I no longer find I am happy with my employment, I quit. If it is no longer necessary to show any respect for flag and country, then I will badmouth my nation and its leaders. If my commitments, monetary or otherwise, seem to be tying me down, I will abandon them. If I no longer get a "buzz" from church services, I will jump to another religion or simply drop out.

So we avoid any long-term commitments and end up with a sense of temporariness, having no roots or lasting relationships. This situation, if accepted by many people, means the death of marriage, contracts, business relationships and even churches.

The Lord tells us something far different about faithfulness, so let us look at what He says.

The principle of keeping our word

When I was a child in western Oregon, I witnessed on several occasions a handshake between my grandfather or father with a bank official, car dealer or merchant. That was all it took to seal a bargain — just a handshake and no written and notarized contracts. How could this be? Because my grandfather and father were as good as their word.

How far we have drifted from that uncomplicated day! Now, even contracts are suspect, with lawyers probing every word for a flaw that can invalidate the document. People's word is no longer trustworthy. If I were asked to show ID at a store, bank or airport checkpoint and I merely said, "I am so-and-so. You can trust me on this," do you suppose officials would buy that? Of course not, because our word is no longer considered our bond.

According to the Bible, our words are still all-important. Matthew 12:17 says that by our words we will be acquitted or justified, and by our words we will be condemned. Ecclesiastes 5:2 warns us to take care what we say, for we are responsible for them. Verse 4 says that when we make a vow to God, we are not to delay in fulfilling it. Does this include our marriage vows, our vow to the Lord in our baptism, our pledges, our contracts? We as Christians have a special obligation to be faithful in all of our dealings with other people, as well as with our Lord.

Faithful unto death

In Revelation 2:10 our Lord told the church in Smyrna to be faithful even to the point of death, and He would give it the crown of life. This was a serious challenge, because officialdom was determined to stamp out Christianity. Only those Christians who could look death in the face and still remain faithful to Christ would be crowned victors. The catacombs in Rome are filled with the remains of martyred Christians who died faithful to their commitment to their Lord. Inscriptions on their tombs attest powerfully to this fact. When the aged Christian leader Polycarp was arrested, the Roman consul felt a small touch of pity for him. Urging him to just curse Christ and he would be set free, he answered, "Eighty-six years I have served him, and he never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" That sealed his death warrant.

In Matthew 25 our Lord describes the final Judgment, when He will separate His sheep from the goats. Those who are faithful until the end of their lives will receive His welcome home. Those who are not will be rejected eternally.

No backing down or turning back

Faithful unto death means also faithful until death, no matter how or when it comes. Once we have vowed to be faithful unto Christ, there is no backing down or out. Paul told certain Galatian brothers that they had fallen from grace by their insistence on returning to the Law of Moses (Galatians 5:4). He added that, "after beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Galatians 3:3).

If it is possible to fall from grace, what about the individual who has left the faith? Can such a person be restored to faithfulness? Yes, if he or she is truly repentant and determined to never again fall away. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 Paul urged the Corinthian church to forgive a repentant brother, to love and restore him to their fellowship. Simon the Sorcerer, in Acts 8, had

become a Christian, but had then asked to purchase certain powers of the Spirit. Peter told him to repent and pray for forgiveness. It may be most difficult to do a 180 and return to the Lord and His church, but failing to do so makes the wanderer worse than an infidel. He or she has denied the faith.

Jesus stands ready to receive the repentant sinner. The song, “The Ninety-and-Nine,” has the Good Shepherd explaining that one of His sheep has wandered away and He goes to the desert to find that sheep. As in the parable of the lost sheep, He calls us back to faithfulness. Are we listening for His call?

So where is our true shelter?

It may be a long way to Heaven, or perhaps a short way, depending on how soon our life is brought to an end. Our number of years doesn’t matter nearly so much as how we have lived them. Our Lord expects us to live a life faithful to Him, regardless of how long or short it is or how filled with difficulties it may be.

We need to follow Job’s wise statement, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised” (Job 1:21). Our true shelter, at any stage of life, is our Lord Jesus. He is ready to fold us into his arms and keep us safe for eternity.

Chapter 34

Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good Christians?

(Job 1:20-22, Matthew 5:11-12,
Philippians 4:11, Hebrews 11:32-40)

Introduction

My good friend and brother Tony Alley, a popular college professor and dedicated Christian servant, died of a brain tumor at a relatively young age. His passing made no sense from a human perspective. In Brazil a 24-year-old missionary apprentice, Kevin Harris, died in the ocean saving two girls from a dangerous riptide. Why, Lord? Just today I received word that my longtime beloved colleague Bill Youngs had passed away, succumbing to cancer. A four-year-old boy at this moment is dying of brain cancer. Why? Why doesn't someone come up with a more definitive cure for the terrible plague that strikes so many of us?

Why do good, capable Christians lose their jobs? Why do their retirement funds evaporate? Why do some mates walk out on a marriage, leaving their family devastated? Why do some lose their homes to fire? Why are some vilified, persecuted and even martyred for their faith?

The list could go on, but the question remains the same: Why do bad things happen to good Christians? Do you know what? There is no ready answer.

However, the Scriptures do shed some light on the matter.

The Evil One at work

Long ago the wealthy, faithful and wise patriarch Job suffered more reverses than most of us can even imagine — his possessions, his children, the bitterness of his wife and his own health. This compounded calamity made no sense. What was behind it all? Was Job hiding some heinous sin, as his friends insisted. Was all of this payback for evils he had committed?

No, and we see why, even though Job didn't. Satan, that sly dog, was behind it all. He couldn't believe that Job was a righteous man without a reason for it. After all, the Lord had poured out His blessings on Job and then had protected both him and his investments. "Take them away," he argued with God, "and he will curse you." If Job were left with nothing, his "propped-up" faith would vanish.

We have the advantage of watching this story unfold, but Job had no such advantage. He remained faithful, despite all that Satan could throw at him. His faith did not depend on things or circumstances, but on trust in God to eventually do right.

The Lord gives and takes away

Upon receiving the terrible news that everything he had gained, even his children, had been lost, Job responded,

"The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21).

How could Job have responded in such a noble way? Because he realized that all he had received in this life had come from God. It was God's property and had been on loan to him. So if that were true, and it was, God had the right to take it back.

This is a lesson that is tough to learn in our materialistic society. Yet, it is emphasized throughout the Bible. David was a mere young shepherd, but had risen to the kingship of Israel. He had received honor, power, wealth, a multiplicity of wives, yet he lusted for more. He took his friend and heroic warrior Uriah's wife from him and then had Uriah killed to cover up his sin. Nathan the prophet nailed him, predicting all of the calamities that would befall him and his family. Nathan passed on to David the fact that with all the king had received, the Lord would have given him even more. "Then why did you despise the word of the Lord ..." (2 Samuel 12:1-12).

Yes, the Lord had given much to David and now would take away his wives and the child that his illicit relationship with Bathsheba would produce. David truly repented (Psalm 51, for example), but he would still lose, seeing even his son Amnon commit incest with his sister and his son Absalom's attempt to tear the kingdom away from him.

Banking treasures in Heaven

We live in a time when investments evaporate and banks fail. Jesus warns us in Matthew 6:19-34 against storing up treasures on earth, yet we still

do and often suffer severe heartburn over them. A Brazilian customs agent once told me, “You Americans throw away more than we Brazilians will ever have.” I have found that to be true. But Jesus says, “Don’t collect everything in the world. Don’t surround yourself with your toys. Deposit your treasures in Heaven, where neither moth nor rust (nor mice) destroy, nor thieves carry away.”

We are not to worry about our situation here on earth. If we trust in the Lord, He will see to our basic necessities, such as food, clothing and shelter. Also, we are not to worry about tomorrow, for we probably can’t change what lies ahead, any more than Job could. Paul had learned to be content, whatever his circumstances — hunger or plenty, freedom or imprisonment (Philippians 4:11). Bad things had happened and would continue to happen to him, yet he was at peace.

When bad things happen

What a high standard Paul set for us to follow! What an even higher standard Jesus set! He endured the agony of one of the most horrible deaths ever devised by cunning humans. He did it in tears and intense pain, yet He did it for our sake.

When bad things happen to good Christian people, some think that our way of life doesn’t really pay off. “Gospel of Prosperity” adherents believe that if they just have enough faith, they will become well off financially, will be successful with their lives and will live free of pain and disease. Our Lord never promised us a rose garden here on earth, but even if He did, we need to remember that roses have thorns.

I recently read an e-mail that fits well here:

“Sandra faced Thanksgiving with not a drop of thankfulness in her heart. She had lost the baby she was carrying when a truck rear-ended her car. Her husband’s job was in jeopardy. Other woes piled up. She went to a florist’s to order a bouquet of roses. Upon hearing some of her tragedy, the clerk told her that she had the perfect arrangement for her.

“To make a long story short, the clerk offered her a bouquet, but the roses had all been snipped off, leaving on the thorns. The clerk told her about all of the difficulties she had faced, but that she had learned to be thankful for thorns. In her misery she had cried out, ‘Why? Why me?’ It had taken time for her to learn that the dark times are important to our faith. Then she added, ‘My experience has shown me that the thorns make the roses more precious. We treasure God’s providential care more during trouble than at

any other time. Remember that it was a crown of thorns that Jesus wore, so that we might know His love. Don't resent the thorns.'

"A card with the thorny arrangement she accepted read, 'My God, I have never thanked you for my thorns ... Teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed closer to you along the path of pain ...'"

Charles Spurgeon once observed,

"I believe the hard-heartest, most cross-grained and most unloving Christians in all the world are those who have not had much trouble in their life. And those that are the most sympathizing, loving and Christ-like are generally those who have the most affliction. The worst thing that can happen to any of us is to have a path made too smooth. One of the greatest blessings the Lord ever gave us was a cross."

So where is our true shelter?

In our journey through life we will feel the pain of thorns, as well as the blessings of roses. Bad things happen to all of us, whether Christian or not. However, we believe that the Lord knows about all of these terrible setbacks we experience and gives us extra strength and comfort to overcome them. Do you remember the poem, "Footprints in the Sand"? Here is an excerpt from it:

"You promised me, Lord, that you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has been only one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, you have not been there for me?"

The Lord replied, "The times when you have seen only one set of footprints in the sand is when I carried you." — Mary Stevenson

I want to walk, dear child, with your hand in mine,
I want to walk and talk of my will divine.
I want to share with you my love so true.
I want to walk hand-in-hand with you.
I want to walk and talk with you, dearest one,
I want to tell you of the life you have won.
I want to share with you my love so true.
I want to walk hand-in-hand with you.

— Glover Shipp

Because of His precious promises to us, we can know that He is walking with us and even carrying us when we most need His presence.

Part 3

Ethics, Anyone?

Chapter 35

When Christ and Culture Collide

(Romans 12:1-2, 2 Corinthians 6:17)

Introduction

Christianity has always struggled over how to respond to the culture about it. The response has run the gamut between absolute separation from the culture by way of the monastic life and total absorption into the prevailing culture. The monastic orders of Catholicism and other groups, along with the Amish of American culture, are illustrations of this first extreme.

The opposite extreme is to become so involved with the culture that the church becomes an arm of it. Liberal political and social groups, along with some churches, follow this path.

For churches, the question is how much or how little to bend to the culture about us. Most of us may agree that there is something unique about Christianity that places it automatically above the agendas of the world's cultures. Yet we know that we live in and partake of human cultures. There are several distinct approaches to the subject, which we will now explore.

Two takes on the church and culture

Richard Niebuhr wrote a landmark book in 1951 called *Christ and Culture*. In it, he presented five basic options on how to deal with human cultures. These were "Christ against culture," "Christ of culture," "Christ above culture," "Christ and culture in paradox" and "Christ the transformer of culture."

In 1996 James Montgomery Boice wrote a book titled, **Foundations of God's City: Christians in a Crumbling Culture**. In this volume he lists four aspects of culture that the Christian should consider. These are "Christ over culture," "Christ above culture," "Christ the servant of culture" and "The world's wisdom about culture."

From these two sources, along with God's Word, we will analyze the

church in relationship to its host culture or cultures. Before we do so, however, we need to add a note about our present cultural situation. In an editorial in *The Edmond (Oklahoma) Sun*, October 10, 200, columnist David Deming wrote:

“The United States was founded by people who wanted nothing more than freedom and the opportunity to work toward a better life for their children. But within a few generations, the progeny of the pioneers have turned into dolts who can’t take responsibility for anything. ...

“(We are) oblivious to the fact that our society is intellectually and artistically bankrupt. Modern art is not good enough to be bad, and popular music is a painful cacophony of obnoxious dissonance. The Internet is mostly used for downloading pornography or playing video games. ...

“In America today, everyone is entitled to everything ... everyone has the right to not be offended, and no one can be held accountable for anything. ... The nation that began with freedom of religion has progressed to freedom from religion, freed from moral constraint and freedom from responsibility.”

Deming may overstate some cases he presents, but not by much. He is pretty much right on target with his assessment of our state today.

Christ over culture

Since Christ is the head of all things (Hebrews 1:1-4), the cultures of this world are under His dominion. He permits them to exist for a time and if they persist in rebellion against God’s will, they are eventually terminated. The Apostle John says, “all things were made by Him and without Him was not anything made that has been made” (John 1:1-5). Daniel told King Nebuchadnezzar that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men (Daniel 4:2). King Belshazzar was judged and punished by God for his blasphemy and idolatry (Daniel 5:25-28). Jesus told Pilate during His trial, “You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above” (John 19:13). Paul taught us, “The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Romans 13:1). Quoting Isaiah, Paul reminds us that every knee will bow before Him and every tongue will confess Jesus as Christ (Isaiah 45:23, Romans 14:11-12).

No president, king, general or other authority can successfully win out against the Lord. The Lord told Moses that Pharaoh would not listen to him, so that God’s wonders might be performed before the king (Exodus 11:10). Nor can a culture win out in a battle against God. When the post-

deluvial people attempted to build a great city, tower and culture on the Plain of Shinar, the Lord intervened due to their pride and lust for power (Genesis 11). The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by the power of God for their rebellion against all morality (Genesis 19). And on and on it goes — the Assyrian culture, the Babylonian culture, the Egyptian, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, the unholy Holy Roman Empire, Ottoman, Moorish, the Third Reich, the Japanese dream of world dominion, the Soviet Union, the reigns of Khomeini and Saddam Hussein.

Only when a people or culture submits to Christ can it expect to prosper and endure, because He is over human cultures. However, assuming that, since Christ is over culture, the church should rule over culture is wrong thinking. This has been the assumption of the Catholic Church for many centuries, with the Pope still wearing the twin-pointed crown which represents his sovereignty over both church and state. John Calvin attempted to build a city in which the church would rule over all civic affairs. This was doomed to failure, because the church's mission is evangelistic, not civic. The world-encompassing goal of Islam is to rule all nations through Muslim clerics and their Sharia (law). This too is doomed to eventual failure because it has no place for the sovereignty of Christ over its life and affairs.

Christ against culture

The Lord is not against those aspects of culture that are positive. For instance, He applauds good marital and family relations, just laws, obedience to civil authorities, care for those in need, immediate response to catastrophes, constructive civic works, tax funds used wisely for the public good, honest officials, just judges and reasonable punishment for wrongdoing, municipal services, civic holidays, fair working conditions and wages, dedicated doctors, reliable hospitals and health services, efficient police and fire services, honest commercial enterprises, sound schools and teachers, constructive artistic expression, books with a moral message and much more.

Nor is He against items in the culture that are neutral, such as where a person lives, the kind of house in which he or she lives, one's profession or job (unless it is ethically or morally questionable), his or her means of transportation, the food eaten (unless it is harmful to the body), where one goes on a holiday (unless it is to a morally or physically questionable location), where and what one studies in school, and other such aspects of the culture.

What is Christ against, then, in a culture? He opposes any aspect of culture that is openly or even clandestinely against His laws for humanity. He is against entertainment that is violent or morally corrupt. He is against unjust laws and officials. He is opposed to dishonesty in government, business or private life. He is opposed to any excessive taxes, mistreatment of citizens, divorce on demand and the lack of proper care for children, the ill, the poor and the elderly. He is opposed to a culture that does not follow God, whether it be idolatrous, polytheistic, atheistic or materialistic. He is opposed to “state churches” endorsed and supported by the government, simply because officialdom can then dominate and manipulate religious expression.

Christ apart from culture

Such organizations as monastic orders, as we have mentioned, follow the principle of separation from culture. They have not been alone in this, however. The Anabaptists, in their “Schleithem Confession” of 1527, noted, “He (God) further admonishes us to withdraw from Babylon and the earthly Egypt that we might not be partakers of the pain and suffering which the Lord will bring upon them” (cited in Boice 1996:140-141). Groups of this sort base their position on such passages as 2 Corinthians 6:17: “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord ...”

No, we are not to totally separate ourselves from the world, for Jesus said that His followers would be in the world, but not of the world. He didn’t pray for them to be taken out of the world, but rather, to be protected from the Evil One (John 17:13-16). The trick is to swim in the world, but not to swallow its bait. The trick is to be salt, light and leaven to the world without being salted down by the world or to allow its leaven to penetrate our hearts. In terms of our cultural surroundings we are often like a frog in a hot kettle. The water gets hotter and hotter, but the frog keeps adjusting to it until he is parboiled by it. We may easily find ourselves in the boiling water of our culture and then have difficulty bailing out of it. Our tolerance level for the violent, suggestive, sexually explicit, vulgar and profane becomes greater and greater until finally we see no evil in any of it.

Christ the servant of culture

Boice points out that the mentality of “Christ the servant of culture” does not buy into the position that Christ and the church are superior to cultures. This position is that Christianity is not better than the world — Christianity must be changed to adapt to postmodern times. The church

must be secularized, becoming a servant of the world's culture. This is a theologically liberal view that will eventually subsume Christianity into a general philosophical and political soup. There will be nothing distinctive or offensive about it (Boice 1996:141-142).

Although the church exists to aid the world in its times of distress, its primary concern must be turning the world away from the world, so to speak, and toward Christ. Our task, even in the midst of humanitarian aid, is to show forth Christ.

So where is our true shelter?

Human cultures are essential developers and transmitters of traditions and values. They are the oil that makes society run. Yet they are not equal to or master of Christianity. We who follow Christ must remain in the world, influencing it for spiritual and moral good, while not becoming like the world. As Paul said, "Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed ..." (Romans 12:2).

Oh, how we need a shelter from the evil that surrounds us daily. Praise the Lord, we have one. His name is Jesus!

Chapter 36

Walking the Walk

(John 13:15, 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Peter 2:21)

Introduction

I remember as a child attending the movie, *Modern Times*, featuring Charlie Chaplin. In it the poor little hero was caught up in assembly-line work, even taking his lunch off the line as it passed by him rapidly, some of it hitting him in the face.

We live today in a Postmodern world, or even a Post-Christian world. It is a world of dizzying change, the breakdown of family and society in general and a time of fuzzy ethical positions. Much like Chaplin's assembly line, it races past us, hardly giving us time to adjust to it. A computer six months old, for instance, is already considered out of date. A recent comic strip has a computer nerd pounding feverishly on his new computer. He commented that he had to hurry before his new toy was obsolete. My first computer had a memory capacity of 640k. The genius of Bill Gates in that year could not envision today's computers of thousands of times more memory. He even commented that he couldn't imagine anyone ever needing more than 640k of memory for a personal computer. My present tiny little Mac Mini has 1.25 Gigabytes on its hard drive and 512 Megabytes of available memory. It can do more than I will ever be able to utilize.

However, the more I try to keep up with technology, the farther behind I get. It is an humbling experience to watch a teenager (or youngster) do things with electronic gadgets that I can't even begin to understand. Our family bought us a new computer several years ago. Our sons were installing it when it locked up. They couldn't discover how to reverse the situation. Then a grandson, about 8, walked up and, with a couple of strokes on the keyboard, had it functioning again. That is life today, complex and changing at hyper-speed.

How can we effectively communicate the Christian culture to the world and demonstrate its blessings and the hope it offers a lost world, without becoming enmeshed ourselves in our surrounding cultural stew?

The problem of future shock

Constant change has brought about a condition called future shock, coming from the title of a book by Alvin Toffler (1971). In it he dealt with the death of permanence, our throw-away society and other issues of life in the fast lane. To illustrate on the level of merchandising, a lightning strike fried our nearly new TV set. We took it to the repair shop, only to find out, after days of waiting, that the set, made in Japan, had no replacement parts. The manufacturer apparently expects that when one of its sets fails, it must be thrown away and a new one purchased. If this is true in the area of manufactured items, it is also true, unfortunately, in the realm of ethics. This is a world in which there seems to be no abiding values, no absolutes, no firm values and no deep convictions. It is a world in which everyone has his or her own style of thinking, believing and doing. What is more, we believe we have the right to do our own thing, regardless of how it might affect others.

Our technological world detrimental to high ethical standards

Such a world, although it has many miraculous devices to improve and prolong life, is dangerously detrimental to high ethical standards, and particularly, to Christian standards. To illustrate, columnist Kathleen Parker wrote in *The Daily Oklahoman* March 23, 2006:

“A third of all American children are born to unwed mothers and half will sleep tonight in a house where their biological father does not live. ... There’s something terribly wrong with this picture, and it is this: These are sad stories [a long litany of them that she listed in the column] that reveal symptoms of a diseased culture in which human relationships have no moral content and children are treated as accessories to adult lives. Yet, these trends are portrayed as the latest ... fashions.

“A society in which women are alone, men are lonely, and children don’t have fathers is nothing to celebrate. And a future world filled with fatherless children — bereft of half their identity and robbed of a father’s love, discipline and authority — won’t likely be a pleasant place to live.”

Today’s world in the light of Scripture

Our purpose in this section is to review many different facets of life in the light of Scripture. We will look at cultures of today and the danger of ungodly elements of them conquering society in general and penetrating the church. We will examine the elements of cultures that are either good or neutral and consider how to incorporate these into the church without

becoming like the world. We will examine the satanic efforts launched continually against Christians to make them slip back into the world.

Present-day pressures appear to be undermining our American culture and Christian faith. We live in a fragmented, pluralistic world, torn apart by conflicting ideologies, social unrest and armed conflict.

On a collision course

When the Titanic set sail on its maiden voyage, it was heralded, not only as the most luxurious and speedy passenger ship yet built, but also as unsinkable. Its engineers couldn't have been more wrong! The Titanic was really on a collision course. The first iceberg it hit cut it open like a tin can. (By the way, the Ark was built by amateurs; the Titanic by professionals.) Our world today is on a collision course with forces that are equally destructive. Blissfully unaware, multitudes about us are passengers on this "Titanic" racing along toward moral destruction. Someone should have spoken up loudly and clearly to Titanic's captain, "Change course, change course! Iceberg ahead!" Change course, world, change course! Calamity lies ahead! Incidentally, we Christians are also on a collision course. Do we realize that? The world is out to either destroy us or at least to neutralize our message and influence us to go along in its direction.

Many opinions about how to respond to cultures

There are many opinions about God's people and how they should respond, or not respond, to human cultures. Some have practiced complete isolation from cultures, as, for example, monastic orders or modern sects that form a colony of extremists hidden away in the mountains.

Others go to the opposite extreme, blending Christianity and human cultures together or even accepting human cultures without really examining them. Mayan Indians in Guatemala retain much of their religious and cultural heritage, mixing it with Catholicism. For instance, they offer a rooster in sacrifice to their ancient gods on the steps of the cathedral. Inside, they kneel before a rectangle of earth, offering candles and other objects to the ancestral gods and then walk to the altar to bow before the church's images. The Catholic Church has elements within its structure and doctrine that come from sources outside of the Bible. For instance, the entire organizational hierarchy of the church is a copy of the Roman Empire's administrative structure.

Catholicism in Brazil tolerates Spiritism and even in some cases, encourages it. In Salvador, for example, the Candomblé Spiritist meeting

place is adjacent to a cathedral and in fact, is on the cathedral grounds. For women to become Mães de Santo (Mothers of Saints) in Candomblé, they must receive a special blessing from the Catholic priest. These are examples of the intermingling of cultural and religious practices.

We have other examples in Islam and even in Christianity. Muhammad borrowed the idea of one supreme God from Jews, who worshiped Yahweh, Coptics who believed in one God only and his Arab ancestors, who worshipped the god al-ilh. These sources produced Allah in his new system. He elevated that god to supremacy and absolute autonomy. He also borrowed the crescent moon of al-ilh as the symbol of his faith. The crescent moon appears at the top of every mosque and on Islamic flags (“Now the Americans will know that God exists,” *Voice of the Martyrs*, November 2001). He incorporated the Ka’aba (the great black box in Mecca), again from his pagan past. It became the centerpiece of the new religion. Also from his past he borrowed the sacred stone in the Ka’aba, the sacred well of Zamzam and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

In American history we incorporated the Norse gods and goddesses for the names of our days of the week, and Roman gods and caesars for our months. We borrowed heavily from our Druid past for many of our practices. And now we have the entire poltergeist scene, witchcraft and magic, fortune telling and Spiritism (or Spiritualism) as emphasized especially in the Harry Potter phenomenon. No, we are certainly not exempt from questionable pagan influences in our society. What pagan practices have been carried over into your family and even your religious life?

Some Old Testament guidelines and examples

Does God give us any guidelines about His people and human cultures? Yes. Let us look at a few of these in the Old Testament:

- The flood (Genesis 6). In verse five we read that even early in human history, every thought of human beings was evil. According to verse 11, the earth was corrupt and violent. Within only a few generations human culture had become so corrupted that only a total washing could cleanse it. God chose a great flood to accomplish this. The Lord did not tolerate then, nor does He now, human violence, perversion and evil behavior. What does this tell us about constant ethnic warfare, such as we see between Israel and the Palestinians, or between the Sunnis and Shi’ites in Iraq, or the “ethnic cleansing” in Sudan? Will either side ever win in God’s sight?

- The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). The whole tribe of humans after the flood had a common language and culture (culture and language being twins in that each defines, influences and is influenced by the other). These post-flood pilgrims settled in Shinar (Mesopotamia, called today Iraq) and decided to build a great tower, city and society. They wanted power and prestige. They wanted a name. They wanted to concentrate their numbers in one location. They wanted to climb up their tower and be on a level with God. The Lord saw what they were doing. He saw their pride and evil to which this could lead, so confused their tongues into different languages and scattered them.

- Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 11:27-32, 12:1-9). Even after the human race had been scattered, it still attempted to concentrate its numbers and power, turning to idolatry and other evils. Out of this situation God called Abram (Abraham) to leave Ur and settle in a far land, where a more holy, God-fearing family could develop into a nation.

- Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:16-19:22). These were important trade centers near the Dead Sea. They were also very immoral, practicing widespread homosexuality and treating others, especially the poor, cruelly. Because their society had become so evil, God destroyed these cities, saving only three people who were still just. It is interesting to note that Lot, Abraham's nephew, had chosen to move toward and then into Sodom. The city held an attraction for him and his family, despite all that was wrong with it.

- Slavery in Egypt (Exodus 1:8-14). Some time after the death of Joseph, a new dynasty arose in Egypt. Joseph's saving his own family and the nation of Egypt had become ancient history. A new Pharaoh knew nothing of this history. He saw how the Israelites had grown to the point at which they outnumbered the Egyptians. This alarmed him. He not only perceived these foreigners as a potential danger to his dynasty, but also a great source of manpower he wasn't utilizing. He decided therefore to enslave the Israelites, treating them ruthlessly. This is typical of some cultures today. They force others to submit to them, by armed might and terrorism, if necessary.

- The Battle of the "gods" (Exodus 7-11). In order to lead the Israelites out of slavery and form them into a holy culture, the Lord sent Moses and Aaron to confront the Pharaoh. What followed was a battle between God and the gods of Egypt. These gods had been created by humans in response to such phenomena as the annual flooding of the Nile, life,

fertility, weather, the sun and moon, death, eternity, etc. Each one of the 10 plagues was aimed specifically at one of the gods of Egypt and each one of them fell before the Lord's power. The ruler and his oldest son (and heir to the throne) were considered gods. When the pharaoh's firstborn died, this took away the next "god" from the throne. Human culture, even the most advanced one of that age, could not long defy God.

Israel was called out of Egypt to become a separate people, dedicated to God in every way, including its assumptions, values and loyalties. It was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6, Deuteronomy 26:16-19). It was to have a divinely guided culture, in contrast with human cultures about it. God's people were not to intermarry with foreigners, follow their gods or do what they did (Numbers 25:1-5; Deuteronomy 7:3-6, 16:21, 18:9-14, 23:17-18, 25:1-5).

However, Israel refused to obey the Lord and be a separate people. Time and again the people fell into idolatry, worshiping the gods of the nations about them (Judges 2:10-23; 1 Kings 12:25-22, 18:20-40). God's people have always seemed to eventually bow to the worldly cultures and influences about them. This means that they have bought into the world view of those outside of the Lord's realm.

As for the Israelites, they became convinced that the gods of Canaan were better for them, because those were the gods of the land and therefore the patrons of Canaan. To have a good crop, their neighbors argued, it was necessary to appease the gods of the land. For their animals and wives to be fertile, they needed to sacrifice to the god/gods of fertility. The Israelite God was of the desert and was invisible. How could He know the situation in Canaan? How could they know He was even with them in Canaan? Their gods had come out of their own needs and desires, and were visible and sensual. They placed no moral prohibitions on them. No wonder Israel was attracted to such a system. Their neighbors offered them a "feel-good" religion that was exciting and officially immoral. Does such an influence exist today? Do Islam, pagan religions, oriental philosophies, Spiritism, New Age, materialism, charismatic religious groups or other such influences attract Christians away from the Faith?

Living in close proximity to other nations and watching how they functioned, Israel chose to copy them. God's people rejected Him as their ruler and wanted a human king to rule over them (1 Samuel 8:1-9). Their king, Saul, led them wrongly and died in battle. David and Solomon ruled well, despite ordering high taxes and lapsing into sin. Solomon's son,

Rehoboam, haughtily scorned the people and lost most of his kingdom (1 Kings 12:1-17). He also saw the people of Judah stray into idolatry and apparently did nothing to stop this (1 Kings 14:22-24). Meanwhile, the kings of the northern country, Israel, uniformly led their people into a terrible level of idolatry (1 Kings 12:25-33). The result was the eventual end of that nation (2 Kings 17:7-23).

Even exile in Assyria and Babylon didn't totally cure God's people of their all-too-human tendencies. Many who returned from exile and intermarried with those of other nations, despite all that God had commanded against such a practice, were severely punished for their lapse (Nehemiah 13:23-28).

The cultural situation in New Testament times

At the time of Christ, there were major parties among the Jews. The hated Romans occupied the land. The liberal Sadducees cozied up to the Romans, while at the same time denying the existence of angels and demons, and of the resurrection. The scribes and Pharisees were the keepers of orthodoxy (meaning, of all of their countless traditions). The Zealots were radical insurrectionists. The Essenes were monastics. Some Jewish leaders and many rank-and-file Jews had their own views on a messiah and Jesus didn't fit those views. They wanted a political-military leader who would rally them to shake off Roman rule and re-establish the kingdom as it had been under David and Solomon. They wanted an earthly king. Jesus was a heavenly king, so they not only rejected Him, but even arranged His death.

Out in the Greco-Roman world, idolatry was rampant. Wherever it ruled supreme, the worst kind of immorality accompanied it — prostitution in the name of religion, drunkenness, adultery, divorce, sexual license, abortion, infanticide, murder ... Sounds like our modern world.

So where is our true shelter?

We can see from this survey that God has always required His people to be separate from the world about them (Isaiah 52:11). As we will see later in the New Testament, we, His people, cannot isolate ourselves totally from the world, but we are not to become like the world.

In other words, we cannot accept the world's assumptions, values and loyalties. When we do this, we have lost the eternal battle for our souls. We must follow the world view that the Lord sets before us. We must look always toward Heaven, the location of our final great shelter — the place in which our citizenship is located and our eternal family is to be found.

Chapter 37

NO!

Ethics in Government and Business?

(Amos 8:4-6, Matthew 6:19-21, Luke 18:18-25, 1 Timothy 6:10)

Introduction

We know something about the world of business and money — bribery, dishonesty, thievery, failure to keep a promise or fulfill a contract. Scams abound and especially on the Internet. Merchants may use dishonest scales and measurements. A gallon of gas may be a little less than a gallon. Or, as happens in Brazil, water is sometimes mixed with the gas. In one case there, little cement was used in constructing a building, so it fell before it was even finished. Officials are often looking for a pay-off or abusing their authority in other ways. The infamous Enron case and the trial of its chief executives is a case in point. Another is bribery and embezzlement by Jack Abramoff, super lobbyist, and others willing to be bribed. His influencing and bribing of congressmen on a massive scale is an example of cheating at high levels. One key congressman lost his seat over this. Another devious trader and his colleagues are in serious trouble over his investment scheme. The governor of Illinois was recently impeached for his misbehavior in office.

The military may be cruel. Police may be corrupt. Business owners may declare bankruptcy in order to get out of paying their debts. Products may be inferior. Taxes may be high. Judges may be unjust. Attorneys, both prosecution and defense, may be more interested in winning their case than in arriving at the truth. Inflation may be out of control. Gasoline prices may soar at a time when oil companies' profits are at record highs.

Christians, we hope, are different from the world in the matter of values. We do not value money and wealth as the world does. We do not cheat others in business. We don't really need, from our end, to draw up contracts and

have them notarized, because we keep our promises. We are honest and kind. We do not attempt to step on other people in our efforts to succeed.

Why is this? We have a higher and nobler calling. We follow the Way of Christ. We are to be a saving and leavening salt for those about us. We are to be the light of the world, reflecting Christ's light to all of those about us (Matthew 5:13-16). We realize that our citizenship is in Heaven, and therefore we act like good citizens of God's Kingdom.

Now let us look at some Scriptures that can guide us through the perils of the modern business world:

Biblical guidelines for the use of money

God's Word spells out in some detail the attitude we should have toward finances. Regarding money, nowhere does the Bible text say that money or wealth are prohibited. However, it does say that the love of money is dangerous and even sinful (1 Timothy 6:10). Paul says in the extended passage from verses 6-10 that people who want to become wealthy can easily fall into a trap of harmful desires that can lead them to ruin.

"Not I," you say? None of us knows how he or she would act with sudden wealth. Very few people can handle it. Suppose that an uncle you never met had extensive herds of cattle. When he died, he left the herds to you. What would you do then? Would you waste your inheritance on things of the world, as the prodigal son did in Luke 15? Or would you handle your newly-acquired wealth for the glory of God and His cause?

Part of this affluence, of course, would be used to care for your family. But beyond family, there are many just causes, and especially the cause of Christ, to which you could apply your wealth. The rich young ruler in Luke 18 did not lose out on the Kingdom of Christ because he was wealthy. Rather, he lost the higher wealth because he loved his earthly wealth too much. Jesus saw that the young man had allowed his riches to become his god. He had to renounce that god in order to connect with the true God in Heaven. So when Christ told him to sell his goods, give the proceeds to the poor and follow Him, the young man went away sorrowful. He concluded that the cost was just too high for him. He couldn't abandon the god he loved so much.

Jesus taught another important lesson in Luke 12:13-21:

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

These words were a prelude to the story Jesus went on to tell about a rich man whose crops were so abundant that he tore down his barns and built bigger ones. Then he sat back and decided to eat, drink and be merry. He believed he was well taken care of for many years. He had his retirement nest egg. He was set. He could lie back in his recliner and drink premium wine. He could eat the choicest of foods. He could throw lavish parties. He could go on cruises. But the Lord had the last word: This foolish man's soul was required of him that very night. Then whose would be all of this that he had hoarded? I just imagine that, if he had heirs, there would have followed a royal squabble over his estate, each party wanting the biggest piece of the family pie.

My wife and I are retired and in our 80s. We know that we have too many "things," none of them very expensive, things collected over more than six decades of marriage. We know that our days on earth are now becoming limited. In order to be better prepared for the day of our passing, we need to downsize all of this. But it is so difficult! Our little possessions mean too much to us. Lord, help us to simplify our lives and goods!

Paul told Timothy to warn those with money not to be arrogant or to place their hope in wealth, because such hope is uncertain. Right now, the value of our modest family retirement funds is less than it was a year ago, due to the fluctuations of the stock market and constantly increasing prices for everything. This is difficult medicine for us to swallow, but we are being forced by circumstances to put our hope in God, who richly provides everything we need (1 Timothy 6:17-19). Even with limited resources we are to do good, share with others and lay up treasure in Heaven, just as Jesus requires of us in Matthew 6:19-21.

Money and possessions are not really ours. Rather, they are on loan to us from God. If we have a home, it is His. If we have a family, it is His. If we have clothing, food and other necessities, they are His. If we have a car, it is His. We are merely caretakers of these blessings. How we use them is of vast importance.

Once a man was being audited by the Internal Revenue. He owed much in taxes and penalties. When he complained that the government was taking everything from him, the examiner asked him what he owned.

"Well, my house."

"Oh, you have a house? Then it is ours."

"Then you will force me to live in my RV."

“You have an RV? It, too, is ours.”

“I suppose you expect me to sleep in my car.”

“You have a car? It is ours.”

“Next thing I know you will be taking my savings.”

“Your savings? Yes, they are ours.”

And so it went, until even the clothes on his back belonged to the government. In a real sense everything we have belongs to the Lord. We brought nothing into the world, except our bare skin, and we will take nothing out of the world, except what we have stored in Heaven (Job 1:21, Matthew 6:19-21, 1 Timothy 6:19-21).

In all of this, we must be diligent to return bountifully to Him, because He gives bountifully to us. Jesus says, “Freely you have received; freely give” (Matthew 10:8). The example of the Macedonian churches should encourage all of us to return of our blessings sacrificially to the Lord. Those congregations first gave themselves to the Lord and then gave beyond their financial ability (2 Corinthians 8). This is the key. They gave themselves, the crucial first step. How many parents, hurried and harassed as they are in our present-day society, give presents, rather than themselves, to their children. They bribe the kids with gifts, but withhold from them the gift of their time. We often do the same in our relationship to God. We hand Him a token gift, but attempt to keep our lives under our own control.

While money is in our hands, we decide what we are going to do with it (Acts 5:4). However, we must exercise caution as to how we obtained it and how we are going to use it, or misrepresent the use of it, as Ananias and Sapphira found out the hard way.

Business attitudes and practices in the Scriptures

Early in the history of the Israelite people, the Lord gave them instructions about business dealings. In Leviticus 19:36 He was so concerned for commercial integrity that He commanded them to use accurate weights and measures. Their weighing and measuring devices were to be exact, not shaved here and there (Deuteronomy 25:13-15). Back in the Old Days (my childhood), the local bakery would give a customer a baker’s dozen — in other words, 13 cookies or doughnuts instead of 12 — to make sure the customer got his or her money’s worth. That might not be a bad policy today in our dealings with other people.

What about lending and borrowing money? Can a Christian charge interest on a loan to another Christian? Can he or she require a deposit on something

borrowed or rented? I would be very cautious about doing so. In Nehemiah 5 God's governor, Nehemiah, severely criticized Jews for exacting usury from their fellow countrymen. Any item necessary to survival, such as a cloak taken in pledge, was to be returned to its owner that night, because he would need it that night as a cover for his bed (Deuteronomy 24:13-15).

God's people were to see that the poor, downtrodden, widows and orphans were cared for and guaranteed justice, yet many of the Jews refused to do this (Zechariah 7:8-13). They trampled the needy and looked only for the Sabbath to be over, in order to return to their merchandising. The Lord accused them of "... skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat" (Amos 8:4-6).

In other words, they were cheating, price gouging, polluting their produce and destroying the poor.

Following the terrorist attack on Manhattan and Washington, D.C., Sept. 11, 2001, the rumor spread that mid-eastern petroleum would become scarce, so some suppliers jacked up the cost of gasoline to a ridiculous level. Was that an honest way of doing business? "Futures" is the name of the game in the stock market and the price of commodities. Someone determines that perhaps an oil producing country may drastically raise the per-barrel price of oil, so on that speculation, called futures trading, stockbrokers and oil processors become nervous and raise their own prices. They may be right on occasion in their predictions, but very often are not. Meanwhile, the inflated price remains in place.

Nehemiah found Jews buying and selling on the Sabbath, so he had the gates of Jerusalem shut at sundown on Fridays and only reopened at sundown on the Sabbath (Nehemiah 13:15-22). Men were even treading the winepresses and harvesting crops on the Sabbath, which was strictly against God's law.

The prophets were harsh against those who gave and received bribes, and against those who oppressed the righteous and deprived the poor of justice in the courts (Amos 5:12-15).

Jesus found merchants selling sacrificial animals and changing Roman Empire money into temple money, all for a big profit (Matthew 21:13). He drove them out, shouting that the Lord's House is a house of prayer, not of merchandise. Putting that into today's context, we should diligently avoid merchandising projects in church buildings for fear of turning

God's house into a moneymaking enterprise. Where does that put bazaars, auctions, raffles, bingo games, garage sales and other such fund-raising activities in church meeting places? Do you see any parallels here with Bible prohibitions against such activities in God's house?

The Apostle Paul ran afoul of Philippian merchants who were selling a young woman's fortune-telling and those in Ephesus who were selling images of the goddess Artemis and copies of her temple. Their sales were so important to them that they tried to have Paul killed. Their profit margin mattered more to them than the truth Paul was proclaiming.

Employer-employee relations

Paul wrote to Timothy to instruct masters to treat their slaves kindly. Slaves were to respect their masters. If their masters were believers, they were to be treated with even more respect (1 Timothy 6:1-2).

In today's somewhat parallel situation, managers must treat their employees fairly. They must give a fair wage based on the going rate and the experience of the employee. They must create a workplace environment that is conducive to productivity and the health of the employees. I worked decades ago for a major company as a staff artist. Most of my colleagues smoked, so there was a constant blue haze of smoke in our work area. At that time no thought was given to the harmful effects of secondhand smoke. Two or three of us didn't smoke. One of this minority of non-smokers was so intolerant about the situation that he made life difficult for all of us. Before long he was fired, not because he was against smoking, but because he had no interpersonal skills. Hopefully, that kind of work environment would not be tolerated today.

Employees, in turn, are to respect their employers, doing an honest day's work and not spending their time criticizing and complaining. One of the greatest problems in the business world is employees ripping off their companies. Above all, those in any kind of business should be scrupulously honest and trustworthy — in their hours, expense accounts, use of company supplies and in every other way.

Hiring and firing of employees are hot buttons in today's business world. Garrett says in his book on business ethics that "the ethics of hiring and firing are governed by the dignity of the applicant or worker, by the contractual relation between employer and employee, and by the purpose of the firm" (Garrett 1966:39). Although written 40 years ago, the author has insights that have been ignored in today's highly competitive cutthroat

business community. Both preferential hiring and nepotism are dangerous practices, involving, as Garrett points out, the unethical practice of favoritism or discrimination (Garrett 1966:44). Promotions, too, must be based on merit, rather than favoritism.

Firings today are often in the form of downsizing, in which hundreds or thousands of employees are laid off. This is justified by the at least supposed need for the company to survive economically, despite contractual agreements made earlier over salaries and benefits. Downsizing may be the only option, but it poses a serious ethical dilemma for the organization. It has not treated the employees properly, even though it may give them severance benefits. Nor has it lived up to its commitments to its employees.

The employees, in turn, may have to offer counter-measures to the company. One major airline at the moment is in bankruptcy and struggling to exist. When it announced that pilots would have to take serious pay cuts and reduced benefits, they chose to go on strike. The results of such action could easily bring about the end of an airline. Then everyone involved would be the loser.

Not only should a business treat its employees fairly, but should also be just in its relationship with other companies. Unfair business tactics include insider trading, pirating the competition's invention or product, forcing the competition out of business by buyouts, boycotting or price lowering to the point at which the competition may no longer operate. The business and industrial world is rife with such unethical practices and the scandals they create.

So where is our true shelter?

I worked several years for a Christian publisher who was a shrewd business man, but had a fiery temper. Woe be to the employee who displeased him! Finally, when his life got totally out of control, I resigned. Although a well-known church leader, his business ethics left much to be desired.

What shall we say, then, about our business ethics? We are first Christians, with all that this name implies, and then employers and employees. We are Christians in our use of and attitude toward money and possessions. We are Christians in our business dealings and employment situations. Any other kind of behavior gives our Lord and His church a black eye, as well as making us guilty of improper behavior before our Lord.

We must take shelter in the ethics taught by the Bible. That is the only safe way in which to guard our lives and values.

Chapter 38

In the Water, But Not of the Water

(Romans 12:21, Hebrews 5:14, 2 Corinthians 6:14,
Philippians 2:15)

Introduction

We are surrounded by, and at times drown in, our culture. It comes at us daily in every way — television, radio, newspapers, magazines, events of all kinds, music, drama, art, government and private programs, schools, business enterprises, friends, family ... We are so much a part of our human culture that we often do not distinguish it from our Christian culture.

How should we respond, as Christians, to our own human and church cultures? This is what we will consider in this chapter.

The positive and neutral aspects of human cultures

Remember, there are positive aspects, as well as neutral ones, of all cultures. Depending upon its stage of development or sophistication, there is much good to be learned from any culture. An example of this was the Brazilian caretaker of our Bible camp in Brazil. He was a genius at grounds keeping and horticulture, even though his formal schooling had not amounted to more than two years. I learned gladly from him. Another lesson we learned was that people need to be warm and outgoing toward each other. We first must become true friends and then we can dialogue constructively. We learned to accept hosting graciously, even though it might have been offered in a tiny shack of a home. We learned to be less rigid in our relationship to time. For example, we learned that it is not that important to begin or end a worship service right on time, nor was it urgent that we rush away from a time together with fellow Christians. When most of the members walked to services or rode public transportation, they were often slow in arriving for classes and worship. This had to be taken into account. When they finally arrived, they wanted their time with their fellow Christians to be a very positive thing, not rushed through.

Any culture has developed, of necessity, ways of coping with its environment and social conditions. Tribes in Latin America, Africa and Asia have home remedies that sometimes surpass those of doctors. In Brazil we had a wild plant called a quebra pedra (stone breaker). A tea made from it was an astringent, dissolving kidney stones. It worked and was free for the taking.

Any culture has developed its own unique architecture, art, music and literature. It has created its own general life style. It has formed its own way of handling social needs such as those of the poor, the orphaned and the elderly. Eskimo tribes long ago designed the igloo, which is wonderfully impervious to cold and storms, and is made from blocks of compacted snow. Andean Indians developed a sophisticated music without ever taking schooling in music institutes. Pacific islanders discovered ways to process sea water, making it safe to drink on long ocean voyages. While Europe was in its Dark Ages, the Islamic world was producing beautiful architecture and making breakthroughs in the sciences. In the 15th to 18th centuries, especially, Europe produced sublime classical music, art and architecture.

So it is with all cultures. There is good in each and it should be appreciated and reinforced. What would you list as positive features in our own culture?

Also in any culture are neutral features. Neither good nor bad, they are options or choices. In many cultures individuals have freedom to move, to seek new and better employment, to take classes, to follow a choice of professions, to live in a home of their own choosing, and even to follow the religion of their choice. This last point may not be all that neutral, but it is a freedom that people enjoy in many countries. Also neutral in God's sight is the kind of government a nation has, as long as it is not oppressive. Our democratic system may function fairly well for us, but may not be the ideal form of government in other cultures, and should not, therefore, be imposed upon them.

These neutral aspects of culture, as we said, are optional. They may be kept, changed or discarded as we see fit.

The negative aspects of human cultures

All cultures, no matter how advanced, have negative features to them. Their basic assumptions, values and loyalties may be askew. They may have a corrupt government. They may have a religion or religions that are totally displeasing to God. They may be resistant to the Lord's will for

them. Some may have a cruel streak in their collective makeup. They may practice widespread dishonesty, bribery or immorality. As we saw Sept. 11, 2001, and countless other times, some have a fanatical dedication to terrorism as a means of achieving their ends.

These are just some of the negative facets of cultures. They must be corrected. If they are not, eventually that culture will be destroyed. We have many examples in the Bible of the condemnation and destruction of cultures that had departed from God.

The first instance is the flood. Genesis 6 tells us that humanity, so soon after the creation, had reached the point at which “every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Genesis 6:5). The only divine solution was to wipe the earth clean, except for one faithful family, and start over with that family’s descendants. Then there was the case of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). The early settlers on the Plain of Shinar arrogantly determined to build a tower reaching to the heavens and a city surrounding it. They wished to make a name for themselves. Their selfish desire for power and position was thwarted by divine mixing of their speech.

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed for the evil they practiced (Genesis 19). The nations dwelling in Canaan were destroyed because of their idolatry and perversions. Israel and Judah were taken captive for their idolatry and other sins against God. Tyre was destroyed, as was Edom, Moab, Philistia, the Assyrian Empire, Egypt, Babylonia and the other kingdoms of that day. As the Old Testament prophets warned, they were punished by God for the evil aspects of their cultures.

How to respond to the positive and neutral aspects of culture

We must never take for granted any aspect of a culture. On the other hand, we should examine it carefully in the light of Scripture. If it passes the biblical test, how should we then respond to it?

If a facet of a culture is positive and beneficial, we should encourage it by word and participation. We should pray for our government and our officials. We should encourage them in their positive efforts verbally and by letter, as well as by our vote. There is nothing biblically wrong in honoring our country’s birth date. There is nothing wrong in serving our country in a positive Christian way. There is nothing wrong in participating in community events, as long as these events are wholesome and we don’t give an inordinate amount of time to them, to the neglect of our family and

our higher calling in Christ. There is nothing wrong in giving to reputable community programs, as long as they don't rob us of our gifts to God.

Can a Christian be a city council member? Can a Christian serve on a community committee or in a civic club? Can a Christian be a scoutmaster, an athletic coach, a leader in a city charity or a member of a community betterment program? Can a Christian serve on the board of a public school or university? Yes to all of these, but within reason. Nehemiah devoted much energy to a material project — rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. This was for a noble cause, but not one directly religious.

One word of caution about civic services: If and when they begin to consume us, demanding too much of our time and resources, then we need to back out of them or at least curtail the amount of time and energy we give to them. Our direct service to God must come first.

How to respond to negative aspects of our culture

This is where the rubber of our Christian commitment meets the road of our culture. Once we have determined from Scripture that a practice in our society is wrong, what do we do? There is certainly much to capture our attention in the realm of negative elements in our culture. Just check the prime time sitcoms or dramas on TV. Before many episodes have passed, every one of the original Ten Commandments have been violated. This anti-biblical behavior is presented as the norm and not the exception. People jump into bed with each other, married or not (generally not). The presence of gays in almost every program is quite apparent. God's name is taken in vain. Religious faith is ridiculed. Parents are dishonored. Individuals are killed. And so on and on it goes.

Historically, some church groups have largely isolated themselves from the world's cultures, living in their exclusive little world and having no social or spiritual impact on those outside of their group. Others are so concerned about living with their culture and not offending anyone that they say little or nothing publicly against wrong attitudes and actions. This has been to the harm of both the church and society. Right now there is an attitude, especially among African-American, to "not snitch." In other words, even if they witness a bloody crime, they will never reveal that. Such a self-preserving attitude may allow violent criminals to go free.

We must take a prophetic stance, as did men of old in the Bible. Moses spoke boldly to Pharaoh about God's orders. Samuel spoke strongly to King Saul about his errors. Nathan the prophet confronted David in no uncertain

terms with his sin and the consequences of it. Elijah publicly condemned Ahab and Jezebel. Other prophets such as Amos cried out against all of the nations, including Israel and Judah. John the Baptist condemned King Herod for his adultery. Jesus powerfully judged the hypocritical religious leaders of His day. Paul condemned a false prophet to his face.

Enough said? Then let us imagine this scene: Our city or state enacts a bill requiring churches to have a quota of homosexuals on their staffs. How shall we answer? The only biblical way is first by prayer and then by persuasion. We must attempt to persuade officials to relent, clearly showing them why. If they do not, we must continue to speak prophetically against this law, regardless of the consequences for us. Early Christians refused to bow to the image of the emperor, even if it meant death. So must we refuse to bow to the wrongheaded aspects of our culture and its demands on us.

In this regard I am reminded of the story of a young preacher who discovered that the church treasurer was dipping into the contributions for his own use. He talked with the treasurer and even called him a thief, but with no success. He took others with him, again with no success. He took the matter to the elders, but they didn't want to create a scene. Finally, he was told to cease and desist with his charges or leave. He opted to leave, but turned as he walked out, saying to the treasurer, "You are still a thief!"

Whatever the bad that exists in our society, we must speak out against it collectively and individually. It doesn't matter if it is about divorce, drugs, AIDS, gays, pornography, abortion, corruption in government or any other area that runs counter to biblical principles, we must still speak out. However, it must be done persuasively and kindly, but clearly and with conviction.

So where is our true shelter?

Culture will always be with us and in us. Just because it is a powerful ingredient in all that we think and do, this doesn't necessarily mean that everything about it is ethical or moral. Our cultural world view may be flawed. Some of our assumptions, values and loyalties may be suspect.

Therefore, we must be alert to every facet of our culture, supporting what is good, accepting what is neutral and strongly resisting what is ungodly. Only then can we show that we are Christians, both by our love and our prophetic voice against injustice and evil.

We may become enemies of the evil aspects of our culture, but can be assured that we are safely under Jesus' protection, come what may.

Chapter 39

Charting a Course Through the Ethical Swamp

(Leviticus 20:23; John 16:18-19, 17:14; 2 Corinthians 6:17)

Introduction

The worst being to ask about water is a fish. It is so constantly surrounded by water that it can't really evaluate it. We are like fish. We are surrounded by our culture and society, so much so that we eventually fail to differentiate between church and culture. It is so easy to allow our society to creep into the church and our own lives, to our spiritual demise.

In our day of rapid communication we absorb much of the world, sometimes for good but most often for bad. E-mail, You Tube, Facebook and the Internet in general mean instant worldwide spread of anything, good or bad. Although the Internet offers much that is good, it harbors countless dangers. One teenage girl interviewed by Dr. Phil on his TV show, had met an older man on the Internet, then had met him in person and had sex with him. To me, the saddest part of this story is that she saw nothing wrong with any of her actions.

Before the Soviet Union fell, there were strong rules in that nation against pornography and harsh punishment for producing or using it. Now that the KGB-controlled system is no more, pornography has taken control and people are surrounded by it. In our country, moral values have declined alarmingly. Recently I heard a man who is head of an organization called "Freedom for Teens" insist that people 13 to 18 years of age should have the right to do anything that adults do — drink, smoke, take drugs, engage in any kind of sexual activity and the like. He especially advocated open sex among teens.

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of this is that those who push for canceling out all moral restraints have no regard at all for the Bible. We live in what

is called the Postmodern Era, in which everyone is said to have a right to believe or do anything he or she wants and no one has a right to question it. This is what is called “freedom of expression” and is the cloak for all kinds of exaggerated speech and behavior. Edna Ganan is a legal guest of the U.S., awaiting citizenship, She is also a daily blogger with keen insights into the behavior and mentality of us Americans. Here is what she says about our vaunted freedom of expression:

“The principles of the U.S. Constitution have made America a super power country, but its weakest point is found in the Bill of Rights on freedom of expression that ... is leading towards an imploding society ... The problem with this provision, ‘freedom of expression,’ lies in our being removed from [our] moral base — a freedom of expression regardless of the consequences to others?

“How can Americans be proud of this provision, freedom of expression that gives no regard to what is right or wrong in American society? ... This blind worship of freedom of expression is leading America to its own downfall; to the path of self-destruction” (from communication received April 8, 2006).

True freedom of expression must be exercised with moral responsibility and a conscience that discerns between right and wrong.

The Bible declares that there is nothing new under the sun. Twice in Judges it is said that “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6, 21:25). This is precisely what is happening in our world today. No longer is the Bible accepted by many as our moral guide. This we will face more and more in the years to come, so we need to be ready to battle it. If not, our spiritual cause, based on absolute moral values and spiritual laws, will die.

Now, what does the Word say about moral and social values? Remember, values are at the heart of one’s world view and especially important, at the heart of a Christian world view.

Justice and social relations

God expects His followers to be socially responsible. In Exodus 20:12-17, 22:16-30 and Leviticus 18 and 19 He outlines the responsibility we have to each other. For instance:

- We must honor our parents.
- We must not murder.

- We must not commit adultery.
- We must never steal from others their goods or good names.
- We must be honest in our testimony.
- We must never covet what belongs to another person.
- We are not to mistreat a foreigner (or in today's political situation, perhaps a refugee).
- We are never to take advantage of a widow or orphan.
- We are not to spread gossip or false reports or back those who do.
- We must not follow the crowd in doing wrong or even encourage such action.
- We are to help others with their problems. If their cow, horse or car, for instance, has ended up in a ditch, help get it out.
- We are to have nothing to do with false charges or lawsuits or make a person guilty who is not.
- We must not accept a bribe or pervert justice.
- We must not defraud others, but pay people what we owe them.
- We must not do anything willfully or carelessly that endangers the life of another person.
- We are not to hate others.
- We must not bear a grudge or seek revenge.
- We are to respect the elderly.
- We cannot become like those about us.

Israel was warned not to become like the nations around them once they settled in the Promised Land (Leviticus 20:23). God's people were not to absorb their customs. Those customs were evil in the extreme. The Canaanites and surrounding peoples sacrificed to various gods that demanded of them child sacrifice, sexual immorality and other perverted practices. Today in much of the world we do not sacrifice our children to pagan gods. We just abort them. Or perhaps we abuse them, neglect them, abandon them or crush them under an ugly divorce.

Israel was not to intermarry with men or women of the natio

ns about them, because this would lead God's people into idolatry (Deuteronomy 7:3-4). Yet they soon did this. Most of Sampson's troubles were due to his Philistine women (Judges 14:1-3). Solomon fell from God's favor because of his many foreign wives and their idolatrous influence on him (1 Kings 11:1-11). Ezra ordered those who had married foreign wives to separate from them (Ezekiel 10). Nehemiah was angry with the Jews who had intermarried with foreigners. Their children no longer spoke their national language or knew the laws by which God governed them. Even the high priest's grandson had married a foreign woman (Nehemiah 13:23-30). The point in all of this was not prejudice on the part of Nehemiah or God against other races or tribes, but against the influence idolatrous people would have on Israel, especially in a family setting. This sounds extreme today, but the principle behind it still holds. Our mate can either make us or break us. We husbands may be the head of our family, but we all know what an influence our wives can have on us.

Despite every warning, Israel did become like other nations. God's people had not even entered the Promised Land yet when they were seduced into idolatry and immorality by the Moabites (Numbers 25). Not too long after Joshua's death Israel turned to the worship of Baal and Asherah, god and goddess of the Canaanites. This happened over and over again and each time God severely punished them. Israel reached its peak of godlessness at the time of Ahab. He married Jezebel, the vicious daughter of the king of Sidon, who brought the Phoenician version of Baal and Asherah worship into Israel (1 Kings 16:29-33). Neighboring Judah fell to the depths under Manasseh, who covered the country with idolatrous worship. He even sacrificed his own son to an idol (2 Kings 21:1-11). Hosea charged Ephraim (Israel) of mixing with the nations (Hosea 7:8). Amos thundered against Israel for its complacency and moral indulgence (Amos 6). Micah accused Israel of plotting to do evil (Micah 2:1-2).

Some learned a lesson from this and determined to follow God at all costs.

Daniel and his friends in captivity chose simple food and water, rather than the rich delicacies and wine offered by the king (Daniel 1). Then in chapter 3, his three friends chose what to them was death rather than bow before the great statue of the king. Decades later Daniel, perhaps 80 or older by then, refused to pray to the king, rather kneeling before God three times a day. The penalty was death, but he was spared by the Lord (Daniel 6).

The Lord has always told His people to come out of the world and be separate (2 Corinthians 6:17). We are in the world, but cannot be of the

world (John 16:18-19, 17:14). We cannot escape being in the world because it surrounds us constantly, but we can be protected from its influence and that of the Evil One behind it by the power of Christ (John 15:17).

So where is our true shelter?

How does the world try to influence us? It does so through television, newspapers, radio, magazines, books and music. It does so through advertising, making us want every imaginable kind of thing that exists and exposing us daily to every kind of sexual perversion and vice. We must speak boldly and firmly, yet in love, on moral issues. We must draw a clear distinction between truth and error, right and wrong in the moral and social realms. If we are timid about such things as adultery, homosexuality, abortion, drinking, drugs and other social ills, Heaven help us and the church! We are expected to be God's ambassadors, speaking on His behalf to a sinful world. Ambassadors are faithful representatives of their governments. How can we be faithful representatives of Christ if our voice is mute on issues that are sinful and destructive?

Our security is in living according to God's moral values, not those of the world.

Chapter 40

How Do We Respond to Moral Issues?

(Proverbs 13:34, Jeremiah 1:5, Romans 1:18-32,
1 Corinthians 6:9, Galatians 5:19-21)

Introduction

Our nation is drowning in a swamp of moral decay. Dr. Phil observed recently on his TV show, “We are going down the toilet,” in reference to the decline of family and family values. He could have added the decline of moral values across the board.

We don’t have to go any farther than the media to see the truth of these statements. Note the media frenzy over the words of Representative Sally Kern about homosexuality being a greater threat to our society than Islam. Her words stirred up intense hatred and death threats worldwide.

The Lord has told us, “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any nation” (Proverbs 14:34). Sin today is rampant and will be our ruin, unless we as a people repent and return to God’s standards. As I type this, a woman in New York was “married” to another woman, just as soon as that became legal. Now she is trying to get a divorce, but judges are saying, “You made your bed, now lie in it!” Sir Walter Scott rightly said, “Oh what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive!” Do we ever have a tangled moral web today!

Pointing the way

Of all people, we in the church should be pointing the way to moral living. However, we cannot present a very united front on moral values. In many cases, each preacher, congregation and member may have a different point of view on moral issues. And to make matters worse, some members fail to live up to even the minimum of Bible-based values.

Yet, the Bible is clear on such issues as sexual license, adultery, divorce, homosexuality, drunkenness, abuse of others, abortion, homicide, revenge,

dirty and profane language, cursing, idolatry, covetousness, cheating, and even lying, gossip, sowing discord, backbiting, refusing help to those in need, etc., etc. Let's examine some of these in the light of Scripture and determine what we believe and teach about them.

Sexual misconduct

Sex, used as God intended, is pure and enjoyable. One of Satan's most heinous tricks has been to pervert what God created for good and pleasure, turning it into something ugly. Today sex has become a plaything. Younger entertainers flaunt their having babies out of wedlock and the media loves it. Rape and sexual abuse have become common. Divorce hovers near the 50 percent mark. Out-of-marriage cohabitation is common. Two out of three girls have had sex by the time they have turned 18.

Do you see an alarming downward spiral here? Romans 1 clearly depicts the situation in the world of Paul's day — lust, impurity, unnatural relations. Our Western world today is following the course that led to Rome's fall. Leviticus 18 has a long list of prohibited sexual acts.

One of the major elements of sexual perversion is that of homosexuality, being militantly pushed as a legitimate alternate life style, "one that comes out of a genetic predisposition and therefore cannot be helped or condemned." But God's Word is very clear on this subject, especially considering its rampant usage in the ancient world. Examples are Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18-19), the Gibeonites (Judges 19:22), the world of Paul's day (Romans 1:24-27, Galatians 5:19-21) and the world as seen in Revelation 22:15. See also Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. If it cannot be helped, if one is just born that way, then homosexuality would be no sin. However, it can be overcome, just as tobacco, alcohol or drug addiction can be overcome.

Fornication and adultery

Again, God's Word is clear on this matter. Fornication is any illicit sexual activity. Adultery is such activity by a married person with someone not his or her mate. Adultery is one of the prohibited acts in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:14). Adulterers were to be executed (Leviticus 20:10). Other passages on adultery include Matthew 19:9, Mark 8:38, 1 Corinthians 6:9, Galatians 5:19, Hebrews 13:4 and James 4:4.

Marriage is considered in the Bible a sacred covenantal relationship, entered into by the couple with God Himself (Genesis 2:24, Proverbs 2:16-18, Malachi 2:13-16, Matthew 19:34-9). Did you catch the implications of

this? Marriage is a covenant, not a contract. It is entered into with God, who created marriage. The only possible reason for divorce is adultery, but we need to be careful here. Neither mate in a divorce may be totally blame free. In the final analysis, God hates divorce! Yet, spousal and child abuse may be legitimate grounds for separation. Such a case is in the Lord's hands to resolve.

Abortion

Related to sexual relations in general is abortion. Life is sacred, even from conception onward. David said that he had been knitted together in his mother's womb, God knowing him from conception onward (Psalm 139:13-16). Jeremiah was told by the Lord, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you and before you were born I set you apart" (Jeremiah 1:5). Every embryo is genetically unique (except for identical twins) and unique in potential. What if Solomon, Paul, Mozart, Michelangelo, Lincoln, Edison, Churchill or other people decisive to the challenge of their day had been aborted? Someone complained to the Lord that He had never provided a genius capable of finding a cure for aids. God answered, "I did, but you aborted him."

Possible exceptions to the crime of abortion may be rape, a fetus terribly deformed or with no brain, or a case of the imminent death of the mother if a pregnancy were to continue. God will have to be the final judge of such cases. Destroying a fetus is killing an individual. That unborn child is a unique human being. The courts have judged in the case of a pregnant woman's being murdered that two humans have been killed, one still unborn. A current commercial for a local hospital tells the story of a mother who suffered a stroke in the first month of her pregnancy. The narrator said that medical personnel fought that day to save two lives. Both survived and eight months later a healthy baby was born.

Homicide

Homicide has become a daily violent occurrence in our city. Do people really believe they can better their life by killing someone else? Or, do they seek the "thrill" of taking a life, which may have been the motive in the recent slaying of two girls in Waleetka, Oklahoma? John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin, succeeded in receiving the death sentence and turning Lincoln into a martyr. The perpetrators of the OKC bombing or the Trade Center and Pentagon bombings didn't achieve their purpose, but rather, severe punishment. No, the terrorist "martyrs" who carried out the

latter bombings did not go to paradise, as they supposed they would, nor did they destroy the economy of the U.S. The economy was temporarily stalled, but recovered.

Murder is clearly condemned in the Bible, from the first one in Genesis 4, to the prohibition of murder in Exodus 20, 1 Peter 4:15 and Revelation 21:8 and 22:15. In 1 John 3:15 we read that no murderer has eternal life. The same verse says that hating another is equal to murder. (See also Matthew 5:21-22.)

However, The Lord differentiates between intentional and unintentional slaying. Accidental killing of another is worthy of a degree of grace (Numbers 35:9-29). Degrees of life-taking are still taken into account in court cases today.

So-called social sins

There are many other sins being winked at today as of little consequence. These included profane and dirty language, idolatry, scams, drunkenness, addictions, pornography, lying, backbiting, sowing discord, lack of self control, poor personal habits, lack of proper care for our own body, setting a bad example for others, blindness to human needs and emergencies, and a host of other such wrongs. Even we Christians may ignore them, but they are all sins and the Lord holds us accountable for them.

So where is our true shelter?

Many, if not most, of these sins against self and others are out of control in today's world, yet few seem to be willing to step up and speak clearly against them. It is politically and socially unacceptable to take a strong stand on such issues.

Yet, the Bible trumpets God's anger against such behavior. Are we so timid that we too are not angered by them?

Of course, we can speak kindly to others about their sins, hating the sin but loving the sinner. Yet, we must speak out, using the Bible as our standard. (This is difficult for me, because I thoroughly dislike confrontations, yet I must eventually face such wrongs.)

We believe that all of the evils considered in this chapter, and a host of others not mentioned, are against God's express will. Therefore, we must stand with God and against such behavior if we are to enjoy His sheltering hand.

Chapter 41

Wrap-up and Applications

Introduction

Finally, this is the wrap-up chapter on Volume Two of **In the Storms of Life, Do We Have a Shelter?** All that we have covered, I believe, are essential for us to understand, to be able to explain why we believe them and to put them into practice, why we take shelter in them. Now let us look back briefly at what we have studied in this text:

Review of each section

We began this volume with what we believe about the authenticity and permanence of the Bible. The writings that became a part of the Bible were written, in the case of the Old Testament, by recognized prophets or kings. New Testament writers were all apostles or close associates of apostles. The only New Testament book without a known author is Hebrews.

The Bible contains much history that is verifiable from external as well as internal sources. Its descriptions are accurate. Its cultural references are on target. Its prophecies came to pass — all but those dealing with the end of time and eternity, which are still in the future.

The oldest known fragment of the Hebrew text, the Aaronic Blessings, dates from the 10th century BC. The Nash Papyrus dates from about the end of the second century BC. The oldest known complete manuscripts, dating in about the fourth century BC, are from the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in 1947 in caves at Qumran. Some New Testament fragments have now been dated to before 70 AD, during the lifetime of the apostles. The oldest complete New Testament manuscript is the Sinaiticus, dating from the 4th century AD.

No text in all history has been given the scrutiny of so many scholars as has the Bible. We believe it to be the inspired Word of God for all time.

The Kingdom of Christ

The Kingdom of Christ, so anticipated by the Jewish people, was announced by Christ Himself, but He and His message were rejected. Some still reject it, while others still await its establishment. However, the apostles knew it existed, mentioning it as already functioning (Colossians 1:13).

The Messiah and His Kingdom was prophesied many times in the Old Testament and again by John the Baptist. Jesus continued this theme, announcing that the Kingdom was near at hand.

The Kingdom is within us, not within an organization, nor in a material or political entity, nor with earthly head, nor in a building. Christ is its head. To enter it, we must be born again. It will continue until the end of time, when Christ will deliver it up to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24).

Christ and His Body

Christ has but one body. This is a basic tenet of the New Testament (Ephesians 1:23). He is the head of this one body, the church. We Christians are members of that body, having been born into it. Each member has unique gifts and a unique place to fill in the body.

The argument that each denomination is a separate member of the body doesn't hold up in the New Testament, because Paul specifically says that we as individuals, not churches, are members of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Whether or not we are really members of that body depends, not totally on our birth into it, but how we conduct ourselves as members.

We believe that Christ has but one body, His church. All who are born again are members of it.

The Church a called-out body

The church is called out of the world. God calls out through Christ, His Spirit and His Word, to give up ourselves and follow Him. As His called-out body, the church is light and is His family.

The church today must be His unique family, in a dog-eat-dog world, just as it was in the first century. We must be light-bearers and the true family of God.

The church has many purposes. It serves as Christ's bride here on earth, a radiant bride without spot or blemish (Ephesians 5:25-27). The church is His building, with Him as our cornerstone and we as living stones in that structure.

The church is also our Savior's voice, sharing His Word with others, and His benevolent hands, serving the needs of others. This is done quietly and for the Lord's honor (Matthew 6:1-4).

The Church and her mission

The church has the most important mission ever given by Christ. This mission is to all in need of Christ, within the congregation, among our local contacts, in prisons, in the inner city, to the poor and ill, as well as to the entire world.

Jesus commanded us to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. This command is as valid and essential as ever. The vast majority of people on earth have no knowledge (or no working knowledge) of Christ. Our obligation to our generation is enormous and becomes greater each day.

Acceptable worship

The Lord gave us instructions about acceptable worship. Our worship is directed to Him, and not so much to people, except to edify and encourage. It is never to be an entertaining show. Rather, it is to be a heartfelt sacrifice of praise, confession, instruction and encouragement. It is always to be decent and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). It is to be in Spirit and in truth (John 4:24).

We are to sing a cappella from the heart, including in our worship psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19). We are to give the fruit of our lips to God in praise (Hebrews 13:15).

Our worship includes the Lord's Supper and sincere prayer (Matthew 26:26-28, Hebrews 4:16). This is part of the worship we are to lift to our Lord.

The church a special family

The church is a nourishing family. God is our Father, Jesus our elder brother and mediator (1 John 3:1, 1 Timothy 2:5).

As children of God, He expects us to be separate from the world, obedient and faithful to Him, to care for one another, and to wear His family name with pride.

The church is our Lord's farming community. He expects us to bear much fruit. This means being closely connected to the Lord, our root, to have a proper attitude, doing good deeds and gathering souls into the Kingdom.

Fruit-bearing is absolutely essential. We are God's vineyard. He prunes and cultivates us, so that we may bear more and more fruit for His glory.

The church a priesthood

The church is a gifted priesthood. Jesus is our great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-5:6, 7:17). With His special priesthood came a special new covenant, sealed in His blood. This priesthood is no longer Mosaic, but Christian.

Our universal priesthood requires sacrifice, worship, service, instruction and example on our part. We have a noble calling and He expects us to live up to it.

The church a pacesetter

The church is a pacesetter for moral values. We must be separate from the world, holding strongly to the moral values given us in God's Word. We must be pointing the way for our immoral world.

As saints of God we must avoid sexual immorality of all kinds, including fornication, adultery, homosexuality, sexual abuse and pornography. We hold marriage as sacred and hate, as does God, divorce. We speak out against abortion, homicide and all of the social sins — profane and dirty language, idolatry, scams, drunkenness, addictions, lying, backbiting, sowing discord, lack of self control, poor personal habits, lack of proper care for our bodies, setting a bad example, being blind to the needs of others ...

Being born into this family

The only access to this body or family is by being born into it. The initial step in this process is conception, which produces faith. As we understand what faith really means, we become convicted of how sinful we are. We repent of our sins and confess our faith in Christ. Then we are born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5) into Christ and His body.

This is not the end of the matter, but simply a birth. We are then to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord, maturing in Him, His Word and our service to him, reaching maturity in the faith.

What it means to be a Christian

Several chapters were devoted to the nature and responsibilities of the Christian life. We are actually the Lord's property, His body, His members and His servants. We are not our own, because we have been bought with a price — the blood of our Lord Jesus.

In the world, but not of the world

We Christians live in a crooked and perverse society. We are like fish swimming in the water, but not of the water. Our citizenship is in Heaven. Therefore, we owe our first allegiance to the Lord. However, since we live in the world, we are to set a Christian example, to be lights shining in a dark place.

So where is our true shelter?

Now we come to the end of this study. It has been demanding on me to prepare it and demanding on all of you who have read it. It sets a high standard for us, but I believe no higher than Scripture requires. May we have the courage and dedication to live up to it, with our Lord's grace and strength, and to share it with other people, especially in our day of doctrinal relativism.

A new version of the Bible has just been released, but simply as a collection of stories, with no chapter or verse divisions. One of its proponents explained that, essentially, important matters were highlighted. The reader could look at those and let them speak to him or her as they wished. Do you see a problem with this approach to Bible reading? Where is interpretation based on the original meaning of the passage, word usage when written, a pattern of doctrine in the Bible that must not be overlooked in studying the text and other such considerations? If we all let the Bible speak to us as we want it to say, we become like Israelites in the times of the judges: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25).

Remember, always, that sound doctrine is absolutely essential. Paul instructed Timothy to take heed to himself and the doctrine he was to teach to others (1 Timothy 4:16). In the storms of daily life, the only anchor we really have is Jesus and His operating manual. It is just as contemporary as today and tomorrow.

Remember, also, the words of Peter about our faith in Christ:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect ... " (1 Peter 3:15).

Our only true shelter in life is found in God and His Word; in Christ, His example and teaching.

When storms around are sweeping,
When lone my watch I'm keeping,
Mid fires of evil falling,
Mid tempters' voices calling,
Remember me, O mighty One!
Remember me, O mighty One!
— Root's New Choir and Congregation

Appendix A

Augustine on Christian Unity

They (those separated from the faith) say, “Why do you seek us? What do you want of us?” We should reply: “You are our brothers.” They may say, “Leave us alone. We have nothing to do with you.” But we have everything to do with you, for we are one in our belief in Christ; and so we should be in one body, under one head.

And so, dear brothers, we entreat you on their behalf, in the name of the very source of our love, by whose milk we are nourished, and whose bread is our strength, in the name of Christ our Lord and his gentle love. For it is time now for us to show them great love and abundant compassion by praying to God for them. May he one day give them a clear mind to repent and to realize that they have nothing whatever to say against the truth; they have nothing now but the sickness of their hatred, and the stronger they think they are, the weaker they become. We entreat you then to pray for them, for they are weak, given to the wisdom of the flesh, to fleshly and carnal things, but yet they are our brothers. They celebrate the same sacraments as we, not indeed with us, but still the same. They respond with the same Amen, not with us, but still the same. And so pour out your hearts for them in prayer to God.

Appendix B

The Declaration and Address

This document has been called the outstanding literary piece of the early 19th century, the Magna Carta of the Restoration and the greatest document ever written in defense of a Christian union.

Following are some of the major points in the Declaration and Address:

- We cannot be judged by our brother, nor can we judge for our brother. We must beware of dividing the Body of Christ and of taking pleasure in divisiveness.
- We should discourage all division in the Body, but rather, restore unity, peace and purity to the whole Church of God.
- We should reject human opinions as of authority. Rather, we should return to and hold fast the original standard. Let us take the Divine Word for our rule; the Holy Spirit for our teacher and guide, to lead us into all truth; and Christ alone ... for our salvation.
- We therefore form ourselves into an association called the “Christian Association of Washington” for the sole purpose of promoting simple evangelical Christianity.
- Who, then, would not be the first among us to give up human inventions in the worship of God, and to cease from imposing his private opinions upon his brethren, that our breaches might thus be healed?

Core propositions of the Declaration and Address

- That the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures ...

- That although the Church of Christ upon earth must necessarily exist in particular and distinct societies ... yet there ought to be no divisions among them. They ought to receive each other as Christ Jesus hath also received them, to be the glory of God.
- That in order to do this, nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion, but what is expressly taught and enjoined upon them by the Word of God.
- That although the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are inseparably connected ... the New Testament is as perfect a constitution for the worship, discipline and government of the New Testament Church ...
- That with respect to the commands and ordinances of our Lord Jesus Christ, where the Scriptures are silent as to the express time or manner of performance, if any such there be, no human authority has power to interfere ...
- That although inferences and deductions from Scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God's holy word, yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection...
- [Those matters] that must be in a great measure the effect of human reasoning, ought not to be made terms of Christian communion ...
- That it is not necessary that persons should have a particular knowledge or distinct apprehension of all Divinely revealed truths in order to entitle them to a place in the church ...
- That division among the Christians is a horrid evil ... It is anti-christian, as it destroys the visible unity of the body of Christ; as if he were divided against himself, excluding and excommunicating a part of himself.

Basic principles of Restoration

This is an abbreviated version of a much longer document. In it are found the basic principles of the American Restoration Movement. They led multitudes back to New Testament Christianity during the life of Thomas Campbell and his son, Alexander.

Thomas's view of the Body of Christ was more inclusive than often accepted in more recent times. He believed that there were genuine Christians in all Protestant churches, but that these Christians would eventually come out of their existing groups to join together in a united body.

Campbell greatly influenced his son, Alexander, who became a nationally-prominent preacher, debater, writer and editor. Thomas came eventually to recede in the public eye, as Alexander grew to assume leadership in the work of restoration.

Appendix C

Areas of Restoration not yet Fully Restored

Introduction

Some are rebelling against the church as it has been functioning, believing that it needs to be modernized and made more attractive to non-members. The church may need to revisit how it practices its faith; how it conducts its business; how it behaves as a church. Nowhere, however, does Scripture suggest that it become more “seeker-friendly.” Rather, we are told to come out of the world and be separate and to maintain at all times purity of doctrine and life. This doesn’t mean not to have dialogue with other faiths or to treat other sincere people with disdain and a combative spirit. But it does mean to stand strongly for what we believe and why we believe it.

We are in part products of the 19th Century Restoration Movement, led by Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Raccoon John Smith, Walter Scott and others. They, in turn, were in debt to many precursors of restoration, dating back even to Bible times.

The purpose of restoration has always been to return to the roots of our faith, due to the constant tendency to stray from them. However, no one, even the most capable, has ever succeeded in achieving a perfect level of restoration. Why? Because we are all fallible and because only the Scriptures give us a perfect set of guidelines to follow.

However, there are some principles of restoration that were valid when first conceived and are still valid. (For example, read Thomas Campbell’s Declaration and Address in Appendix A.)

Part of the reason for unrest in the church today is that, in style of how we practice our faith, many of us live in the past. A Baptist leader, Ed Stetzer, recently observed about the decline in Baptist churches and Churches of Christ, indicated that both groups still have a 1950’s mentality, “If the 50s came back, most of your churches and most of my churches are ready to go. The reality is, we don’t live in the 50s anymore” (*The Christian*

Chronicle, February 2009:18). We leave the impression that we have arrived at all truth; that we have ownership of all of the New Testament faith. I have just read about a radio preacher who boasted this very thing.

Some time back we seemed to have stopped examining the Scriptures in the light of restoration. We became complacent in our having arrived at all truth. I have given a lot of thought to areas of restoration that have been ignored or at least not given much attention. Some have been called to my attention, when it was asked why we do not practice certain things.

Further restoration called for

The following points are all clearly presented in Scripture, but not being practiced on a consistent basis. Which of these should be practiced today? Why, or why not?

- Praying for and anointing the sick with oil by the elders (James 5:14-15).
- Breaking the bread by the Communion leader after blessing it (Luke 22:19).
- Strongly emphasizing repentance as an essential prerequisite to baptism (Acts 2:38).
- Actually confessing aloud our faith in Christ before baptism, rather than just giving assent (Romans 10:8-10).
- Fasting, especially during special times of stress, danger or dedication (Acts 13:2-3).
- Laying on of hands for those being set apart for a special task or mission (Acts 13:4).
- Preachers serving more as evangelists than following our present model of salaried professional pulpit or specialized ministers (Ephesians 4:11, 2 Timothy 4:5). These brothers handle most of the hospital visits, weddings, funerals and many church administrative duties, which are duties not found specifically for them in the New Testament. In this we are following the Protestant/Evangelical model of pulpit pastors.
- Confessing our faults to each other and praying for each other (James 5:16). The former we do, but on a limited basis. The latter we observe in a better way.

- Practicing church discipline (Ephesians 5:11, 2 Timothy 4:2, 1 Corinthians 5:1-5). This is rarely done in today's churches, even when there is publicly-known sin going on among some of the members.
- Having more spontaneity in worship (1 Corinthians 14:26, 29). The format for worship in most congregations is very predictable, with little room for exhortations, additional Bible readings, prayers or songs.
- Standing for the reading of Scripture in worship (Nehemiah 8:5).
- Kneeling in prayer (Nehemiah 8:6, Acts 20:36, Ephesians 3:14).
- Practicing a high level of individual and corporate devoutness (Acts 22:10).
- Demonstrating unity among all the believers (John 17:20-21, Ephesians 4:3,13).
- Showing to the world the agape love that Jesus requires of us (John 15:12, 1 Corinthians 13).
- Being truly dedicated to soul-saving, both locally and internationally.
- Standing firmly against the evils that surround us daily (Ephesians 6:10-18).

Solution for our unrest

If we consistently practiced the Christian life and taught the Christian Gospel in a spirit of love and gentleness, yet insistently, I am convinced that much of the unrest found in the church today, and the resulting innovations and splintering that are going on, would vanish in the light of a truly restored New Testament church.

Do you agree? If so, what can we do about it?

Appendix D

Moral Intelligence

© Vincent di Norcia 2003

Moral Intelligence reflects the fact that we aren't born moral (or immoral), and that we have to learn how to be good. Learning to be good people involves communication, feedback, socialization, and education. And it never ends. For no one has learned to do everything right all the time. None of us is perfect.

Too often, I fear, we think of ethical choices and behavior in terms only of good intentions or sincere motives. But good will isn't good enough. It all too frequently ends us up in the wrong place. The gap between the final result and original intent is often vast. Aiming to do the right thing is no excuse for doing the stupid thing. Free will is no excuse for bad choices. What we need is an intelligent approach to doing the right thing. That is what moral intelligence is all about.

Moral Intelligence measures our motives and methods by their results. Humans are smart animals. We accept feedback. We can learn to close the gap between the good we intended and the good we achieved. Morally, we need to learn to act intelligently, and to attain the best achievable level of good practice, as in every other part of life. We have to access the best available information, minimize the risks, and optimize the benefits for all involved. That is what moral intelligence is like in action.

The best is not the perfect. The good, often limited and inadequate, is often the best we can do in the situation. Limited resources and constraining circumstances may mean we have to ... accept an outcome that falls far short of our ideal. Doing the good thing is better than trying to be perfect and failing. Aiming for All or Nothing, usually means getting nothing at all. Doing some good is better than nothing. Moral Intelligence suggests that we should care for a few Core Ethical Values, learn to solve Social Problems, be guided by Intelligent Practice Maxims, and Avoid Common Pitfalls.

Resources

Alexander, David and Pat 1991 Eerdman's Handbook to the Bible. Oxford, England:Lyon Publishing.

Boyce, James Montgomery 1996 Foundations of God's City: Christians in a Crumbling Culture. Downers Grove, Indiana: Intervarsity Press.

Carmode, Scott 2008 Article in Focus, December, 2008.

Dickson, Roger 1996 Sovereignty of the Father and Son. Fort Worth, Texas:Star Bible Publications.

Fairlie, Henry 1971 Seven Deadly Sins Today. Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press.

Ferguson, Everett n.d. The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today. Grand Rapids:Eerdmans Publishing.

Jeffrey, Grant R. 1996 The Signature of God: Astonishing Bible Discoveries. Wheaton, Il.:Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Knowles, Victor 1986 What the Bible Says About Angels and Demons. Joplin, Mo.:College Press Publishing Company.

Money, Royce 1993 On This Rock I Will Build My Church. Abilene, Texas:Abilene Christian University.

Nathanson, Bernard N., M.D. 1996 The Hand of God: A Journey from Death to Life by the Abortion Doctor Who Changed His Mind. Washington, D.C.:Regnery Publishing, Inc.

Packer, J.J. 2005 Knowing God. Hodder Publishing Co.

Pink, Arthur 1965 The Sovereignty of God. Grand Rapids, Mich.:Baker Book House.

Piper, John 1991 The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God. Portland, Oregon:Multnomah.

Price, John 2005 Old Light on New Worship: Musical Instruments and the Worship of God. Avinger, Texas:Simpson Publishing Company Pulpit Commentary, Vol. 8, page 215

- Russell, Jeffrey Burton 1986 *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World*. Ithica and London: Cornell University Press.
- Scargill, Arthur 1982 Editorial in *The Sunday Times*, January 10, 1982.
- Scupin, Raymond, Ed. 2000 *Religion and Culture*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Sheerer, Jim, and Charles L. Williams 1998 *Directions for the Road Ahead*. Chickasha, Okla.: Yeoman Press.
- Smedes, Lewis B. 1983 *Mere Morality: What God Expects from Ordinary People*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Smith, F. LaGard 1992 *The Cultural Church*. Nashville, Tenn.: 20th Century Christian.
- Sng, Bobby E.K., and Choong Chee Pang, Eds. 1991 *Church and Culture: Singapore Contest*. Singapore: Graduates' Christian Fellowship.
- Stowell, Joe 2007 *Our Daily Bread*, Oct. 2007, 4.
- Strobel, Lee
- 2001 *The Case for Christ*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan.
- 2004 *The Case for Faith*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan.
- 2004 *The Case for a Creator*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan.
- Toffler, Alvin 1971 *Future Shock*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Toler, Stan 1995 *God Has Never Failed Me, But He's Sure Scared Me to Death a Few Times*. Tulsa, Okla.: Honor Books.
- Turner, James 1996 *Secular Humanism: A Review and Critique of the Religion of Left Extremism*. Edmond, Oklahoma: Interface Publishing Company.
- Waldron, Jim E., Ed. 1986 *Is There a Universal Code of Ethics?* Winona, Miss.: J.C. Choate Publications.
- Whitehead, Barbara Dafoe 1997 *The Divorce Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

